Shantae: The Ties That Bind

By: Seantae2425

A sequel to Shantae: A New Genie. Wrapping up loose ends in the previous story.

Status: abandoned

Published: 2024-12-01

Updated: 2025-06-25

Words: 51337

Chapters: 8

Original source: https://archiveofourown.org/works/45906964

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Shantae: The Ties That Bind

Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

The mayor munched on his chocolate bar, waving to the townsfolk when a giant bird flew down from the sky, landing inches away from him. He screamed, falling over and landing flat on his butt. A bright light engulfed the bird before turning into the shape of a certain half-Genie. “Shantae?” the mayor questioned.

“Hiya, mayor,” Shantae greeted cheerfully.

“So you can use magic,” the mayor observed, picking himself up.

“Well, I can now,” Shantae shrugged. “I learned it while saving the town from a pirate attack.”

“Guess we can throw a celebration,” the mayor replied. “How about in two days? Does that work for you?”

“Uh, sure?” Shantae questioned. “I do need to tell you something, mayor.”

“What is it?”

“The battle I had with the pirates left me half-deaf,” Shantae explained. “I can’t hear out of my left ear.”

The mayor blinked in confusion. “Do I need to fire you?” he asked.

“What?! No!” Shantae shouted. “Why would you do that?”

“Well, that really puts you at a disadvantage with helping the town,” the mayor pointed out. “I can’t keep liabilities around.”

“It’ll be fine,” Shantae insisted, taking a step closer. “I’m learning how to read lips,” she lied, although she did intend on doing that at some point.

“Fine,” the mayor groaned. “At least we have Holly to keep an eye

on things."

Shantae sighed, unsure how to truly react to his indifference. "Thanks, mayor…"

"Anytime," the mayor spoke nonchalantly, walking away. "See you in two days. Six o'clock sharp."

Shantae groaned before heading into town. On her way through the town's market, she bumped into a familiar zombie. "Heya, Shantae," Rotty greeted cheerfully.

"Hi, Rotty," Shantae sighed.

"Something the matter?" Rotty asked.

"Kinda," Shantae stated. "It's just… the mayor."

"What he'd do now?" Rotty questioned.

"He said he was throwing me a celebration for stopping the pirate attack, but then almost *fired* me for being half-deaf," Shantae complained, resentment growing in her voice.

"He can't do that, can he?" Rotty asked.

"I… I don't know," Shantae groaned. "I don't want to think about it. So, why are you in town? I thought you left."

"Poe wanted to see what he could buy while he was in town," Rotty explained. "I also forgot to get your phone number. And I need to give you Agnes's phone number too."

"Oh, sure," Shantae replied, pulling out her phone. "Here it is."

"And I'm checking up on Hedgehog," Rotty stated.

"How's he doing?" Shantae asked. "I was going to see how he was doing."

"He's still in a lot of pain, but he'll be fine given time," Rotty explained. "I wanted to talk to Sky, but she got scared and asked me

to leave."

"I'm sorry," Shantae apologized.

"Maybe you could put in a good word for me," Rotty suggested. "It would help out a lot."

"I will," Shantae assured.

"Thanks. "So, you got anything planned for today?" Rotty asked.

"Not really," Shantae replied.

"How about later tonight, you and I hang out?" Rotty suggested. "I got two tickets Poe gave me for a magic carpet race."

Shantae chuckled. "Are you asking me out already?" she questioned.

"I mean if you want to make it a date, then I don't mind," Rotty giggled. "But it wasn't supposed to be a date. Just two friends hanging out."

"I'm fine with that," Shantae replied. "Friends, I mean."

Two zombies appeared behind Rotty, both towering over her. One had a hunchback and wore a yellow jacket, purple pants, and yellow-rimmed glasses. The other, taller one had sideburns and wore an open purple jacket and matching pants.

"So you're the girl Rotters likes, huh?" the taller one asked, walking over to speak from the side that Shantae could actually hear from. The half-Genie assumed Rotty had told them about her condition.

"I guess I am," Shantae murmured. "I'm guessing you're her brothers."

"Yes, I'm Poe," the shorter one introduced himself before gesturing to the taller one. "And this is Abner. Pleasure meeting you."

"So how long have you two known each other?" Abner asked.

“A couple days,” Shantae answered.

“I see,” Abner grunted.

“I get the impression you don’t like me very much,” Shantae observed.

“It’s not that. We’re immortal and you’re not,” Abner pointed out. “Anybody Rotters makes friends with is going to die someday, but we’ll still be here, you know?”

“I’m aware,” Shantae pointed out. “That’s why I’m working on figuring out how to turn you all back to human.”

“You are?” Abner questioned, crossing his arms. “How?”

“I’m… still figuring that part out,” Shantae admitted. *If Vera had some of my mom’s magic in her, then I should have some of her mom’s too. Combine that together and it should be able to save them. I hope.*

“Cut her some slack, Ab,” Rotty interjected.

Abner groaned. “Fine. We’ll be waiting in the wagon.” Him and Poe began walking away, leaving the zombie and the half-Genie alone together.

“Glad you haven’t forgotten about that,” Rotty spoke into Shantae’s ear. “And sorry about Ab. He’s a bit of a worry wart.”

“I get where he’s coming from,” Shantae admitted. “But I’m going to help you guys. I promise.”

Rotty grinned. “Thanks, Shantae,” she said, pulling herself closer to the half-Genie before stopping herself. “Nah, I’ll save that for when I’m human again.”

“That’s assuming we’ll be dating by then. You sure like kissing me, huh?” Shantae laughed.

“What gave it away?” Rotty joked. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Shantae replied. “So, what’s the magic carpet race about?”

“It’s basically people racing on magic carpets,” Rotty explained. “Pretty self-explanatory.”

“What time is the race?” Shantae asked.

“Seven tonight. I’ll text you the directions.” Looking at her phone briefly, Rotty looked back at Shantae. “I gotta go. Brothers are waiting for me. See ya.” She waved goodbye as she disappeared into a crowd of people.

Shantae let out a sigh. She wasn’t sure how to feel about Rottytops. They had only known each other for a few days, but already Shantae felt a close connection with her. Not necessarily romantic per se, but a close connection nonetheless. She considered Rotty a friend at least, and a strong one at that. *I’d better check on Bolo,* she thought to herself.

“How ya holding up, buddy?” Shantae asked, inside Mimic’s lab. The young man had his limbs in casts while Mimic was in another room.

“Could be better,” Bolo sighed. “I don’t suppose you have a potion, do you?”

“I flew over to Water Town to get you one,” Shantae answered, pulling a vial out of her pocket. “They’re getting pricier.”

Sky stood up from her chair next to Bolo. “Please tell me you’re not falling for one of those scams too,” she pleaded nervously.

“It’s not a scam, it really works,” Bolo insisted.

“He’s actually right,” Shantae pointed out, pouring the liquid into Bolo’s mouth. Bolo shook his limbs around, moving them freely without a care in the world. He stood up, stretching his arms as he tore off the casts.

“Much better,” he said, laughing.

“You’re… okay?” Sky asked in disbelief. “How?”

“I don’t really understand it either,” Shantae admitted.

“It just works,” Bolo chuckled.

Sky sighed. “I swear, my life was fairly normal until a couple days ago.”

“Speaking of that, you remember that zombie girl Rottytops?” Shantae asked Sky, who immediately tensed up.

“Yes…”

“I don’t know your history with zombies, but she’s more like us than she is like them. Give her a chance, the next time you see her.”

Sky let out a sigh. “I’ll try.”

“If you guys need anything else, just text me,” Shantae said, walking out the door. “I need to see how Harmony’s doing.” She bumped into a certain blonde girl on her way out. “Ow… sorry,” she apologized, rubbing her head.

“It’s okay,” the girl spoke, readjusting her chef’s hat. “Is Bolo here?”

“Yeah, do you know him?” Shantae asked.

“Kinda,” the girl stated. “He and I met the other day. My name’s Emma. You called him on the phone and I was there at the time.”

“I’m guessing you know Harmony then?” Shantae assumed.

“Yep, my first ever customer,” Emma said proudly, flicking her chef’s hat. “Ever since she showed up, I’ve been getting customers left and right.”

“That’s great to hear!” Shantae exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “Maybe you can move your business into Scuttle Town. We’d love to have you!”

“Eh, I think I’ll pass,” Emma said hesitantly. “I have bad memories of

this town."

"Why?" Shantae asked.

Emma sighed. "My dad and I used to live here. When I moved out, he left town and I haven't seen him since. He didn't want to be a safety net in case my dreams as a chef failed."

"What is wrong with your dad?" Shantae questioned, resentment filling her voice. "Who does that to their own kid?"

"I don't like thinking about it," Emma sighed. "Hey, how come you keep holding your hand toward your ear like that?"

"Oh, well, I'm kinda half-deaf," Shantae explained nonchalantly.

"Wait, how did that happen?" Emma questioned. "Is that why you're standing so close to me?"

"Yeah," Shantae spoke with a quick nod. "That voice that talked to Harmony… we beat him, but he left me like this."

"I'm so sorry," Emma spoke. "Tell you what. Next time you come to my shop, you get whatever you want. Completely free."

"Aww, you don't have to do that for me," Shantae murmured.

"It'll be fine," Emma insisted. "Harmony's your friend, right? A friend of Harmony is a friend of mine."

"If you say so," Shantae replied. "I need to go visit her, anyway. We can go together if you want."

"Sure," Emma replied. "Let me go check on Bolo first."

"Go ahead," Shantae stated.

Emma headed into Mimic's lab, finding the young man she sought doing push-ups. "You're looking better," Emma observed.

Bolo stopped his exercises and bounced to his feet. "Emma?" he asked, freezing up once more.

“Not again,” Sky groaned. “I’m sorry about this.”

“I’ve been wondering about that,” Emma commented. “Why does he do that?”

“He does that with every pretty girl he sees,” Sky explained.

“Has he ever done it with you?” Emma questioned.

“No,” Sky replied. “He just sees me as a friend.”

“I wonder if we can fix it,” Emma mused. “Him freezing up, I mean.”

“Why the sudden interest in helping Bolo?” Sky asked.

“I wanted to see how he was doing,” Emma explained. “I heard from a customer that he had gotten seriously hurt, so I wanted to cheer him up… and I wanted to help him out with his little problem.”

“Why? Do you want to date him or something?” Sky questioned.

“Maybe,” Emma giggled nervously. “Okay, yes. But I can’t date a guy with a problem like this.”

“You and Bolo are truly two of a kind,” Sky observed.

“What do you mean?”

“Both of you want to ask each other out,” Sky replied. “We had to remind him to slow things down.”

“I want to take things slow too,” Emma pointed out. “I want to be his friend and get to know him. I just want to help fix his problem first. I see it not just as a favor to him but to everyone who might want to date him.”

“Good luck with that,” Sky sighed.

Bolo shook his head suddenly, finally snapping out of his trance. “Hey, I can do it,” he insisted, startling Sky. “Thanks, Emma.”

“Anytime, dude,” Emma spoke with a grin. “Let’s hang out tomorrow at my place. Sound good?”

“Yep.”

“Good. Let me give you my number.” After doing so, she walked out and saw a blue humanoid bird in front of her. “Uh… hi?” The bird squawked, confusing Emma further. “Wait, are you Shantae?” The bird nodded. “Wow. So you’re a half-Genie just like Harmony.” The bird nodded again. “I’m guessing you want me to fly on your back.” The bird nodded one last time. “Alright. You got it.”

Harmony munched on some cereal bitterly. Cherami had gone out to get some groceries while Harmony offered to watch over the cottage. The redhead was still coming to terms with what had occurred the previous day. *Maybe Cherami can tell me some stories about Mom and Dad,* she thought. *After all, they met when Dad was trying to get money for Cherami. She’s probably got stories.*

The sound of knocking came from the front door, making Harmony stand up and walk up to the door. She peered out the hole in the door, seeing two familiar faces that made her smile. She immediately opened the door and found herself receiving a bear hug from both Shantae and Emma. “I wasn’t expecting you, Emma,” Harmony admitted.

“We met today and found we had a mutual friend,” Emma explained.

“Harmony! Your clothes!” Shantae exclaimed, noticing Harmony’s new outfit.

“What’s wrong?” Harmony questioned.

Shantae grinned deviously. “They’re… a bit excessive.”

Harmony groaned. “They’re the only ones I could find that fit me,” she explained, embarrassed by the amount of skin her new clothes had shown off. “And besides, they’re my mom’s clothes. I figured I’d be making her proud.”

“I get that,” Shantae admitted. “That’s why I wear my mom’s sapphire.”

“You must really care about her,” Harmony observed. If she was being honest with herself, she held slight resentment towards Ana. After all, Ana had started the chain of events that led to her parents’ deaths. She knew Ana had atoned through death for her mistakes, but she still could not see Ana in a positive light.

Shantae nodded. “Despite all the stupid stuff she’s done, I think deep down, she was a good person. And I want to honor the best parts about her.”

“I’m glad you’re able to see that side of her,” Harmony replied.

“Wait, did you guys actually get to know your moms?” Emma asked curiously.

“If I did, I don’t really remember,” Shantae explained.

“I did for some of my life,” Harmony explained. “The pieces are coming back together slowly.”

“I never really got to know my mom,” Emma sighed. “She died giving birth to me.”

“Emma, I’m so sorry,” Harmony apologized.

“Thank you,” Emma said, wiping away a small tear. “Can we… let’s talk about something less… depressing?”

“Sure,” Shantae replied. “I’m hanging out with a friend tonight.”

“Whatcha doing?” Emma asked eagerly.

“We’re going to a race,” Shantae explained.

“Sounds fun,” Emma replied.

“I hope you two have a good time,” Harmony stated.

“Thanks, Harmony,” Shantae grinned.

“So, what are you planning to do in the meantime?” Emma asked.

“I’m not sure,” Shantae admitted. “Harmony, do you have any

suggestions?”

“Maybe we can play a game of cards?” Harmony suggested. “My grandma and I played some earlier.”

“Then it’s settled,” Shantae said with a grin. “Cards it is.”

Rotty waited outside the entrance of the stadium, tapping her foot anxiously. She could feel something tap her on the shoulder, making her spin around. “Hi, Rotty,” Shantae greeted her calmly.

“Oh hey, you made it,” Rotty replied.

“Of course I did,” Shantae stated with a smile. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I was just worried I pushed you away with you know… trying to kiss you earlier.”

Shantae placed an arm on Rotty’s shoulder. “Rotty, I told you. It’s fine.”

“Why though?” Rotty asked. “I feel like I overstepped boundaries.”

“I’m okay with it because I can tell you aren’t trying to be a creep,” Shantae explained. “You haven’t been in a relationship before, have you?”

“Nope,” Rotty chuckled nervously. “Well, not that I can remember.”

“I’ve been in a few,” Shantae replied. “And I can tell when somebody doesn’t know the ropes of one.”

“Wait, I thought we were just friends,” Rotty laughed.

“We are, but it’s a bit complicated,” Shantae replied. “I don’t know how I really feel about you. I think there’s a good chance that I like you. But I don’t know. Right now, it feels like we’re in a relationship, even though we’re not. Does that make any sense?”

Rotty nodded. “I’ve got an idea,” she suggested. “Let’s just get to

know each other first, and see how things progress from there."

"That sounds good to me," Shantae replied.

"So, you ready for the race?" Rotty asked.

Shantae grinned. "You bet I am."

The duo walked towards the entrance, but were blocked off by a guard. "Sorry, but you would've had to have been two minutes ago. We cannot take anymore attendees."

"Aw man," Rotty complained. *Guess our conversation lasted longer than I thought.*

"It's fine," Shantae replied as the duo walked away. "I only really came to spend time with you, Rotty."

"Thanks," Rotty stated. "You want to hang out at your place?"

"Sure," Shantae replied. "We can play some old video games I got."

"Sounds good to me," Rotty agreed.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

“How are you winning?” Shantae questioned. “I’ve been playing this game for years.”

“Guess I must have too,” Rotty chuckled. “Some things you just never forget. That and you keep forgetting to block low.” Shantae groaned, watching her character get annihilated by a final attack in the video game. “Want to go again?” Rotty asked.

“No,” Shantae sighed, lying her head back on the couch cushion.

“Somebody’s a sore loser,” Rotty joked.

“I am not,” Shantae pouted. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“If you don’t want to keep playing, what do you want to do?”

“Talk about Desert Blaze?” Shantae suggested.

“We can do that,” Rotty replied. “What chapter were you on again?”

“Fifty-four,” Shantae answered. “Five away from finishing it.”

“Want me to wait until you finish reading it?” Rotty asked.

“Sure,” Shantae replied. “Shouldn’t that be long. I’m a quick reader.”

“Then how come you haven’t finished it yet?” Rotty snorted.

“I’m a lazy reader,” Shantae admitted sheepishly.

“And… done,” Shantae stated, closing the book and letting out a yawn. “That took a while. Forgot there was romance in the story.”

“I thought it was pretty sweet,” Rotty stated.

“Yeah, it was,” Shantae replied. “I’ve been thinking about something.”

“What’s that?” Rotty asked.

“As much as I want to talk about Desert Blaze, we can do that another time,” Shantae explained. “I want to see you spend some time with Bolo and Sky. They’re my best friends and I want to see them get along with you. Especially Sky.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Rotty replied. “You want to invite them over right now?”

“If they’re not too busy, I’ll text them right now,” Shantae replied, pulling out her phone. After waiting a few minutes, Shantae got a response. “They’ll be over in a while.”

“You think Sky’s going to be okay with me?” Rotty asked.

“I hope so,” Shantae replied. “You want to talk about Desert Blaze in the meantime?”

“Sure.”

“Bolo!” Shantae exclaimed upon opening the door. “And Sky!”

“Hi, Shantae,” Sky greeted, attempting a smile.

“I brought beef jerky!” Bolo announced proudly, pulling a bag out of his pocket.

“Why?” Shantae and Sky questioned at the same time.

“I thought you guys would like it,” Bolo murmured.

“I appreciate it, Hedgehog,” Rotty chimed in, appearing to the side of Shantae.

“Hedgehog?” Bolo questioned.

“Oh yeah,” Rotty replied. “I give nicknames to everyone.”

“Can you just call me Bolo?”

“Sure,” Rotty said nonchalantly, holding her arms behind her back. “And I’m guessing you just want to be called Sky?”

“Yes,” Sky answered.

“Come on in, guys,” Shantae spoke, allowing everyone to walk in.

“Where’s your new roommate?” Bolo asked. “Heather, I think?”

“I think it’s Holly,” Shantae replied. “And she’s usually out. I don’t know where she is unless she’s here sleeping.”

“Sounds like a cat,” Rotty snickered.

“So, what do you guys have planned for tonight?” Bolo asked.

“I wanted to have you guys get to know Rotty,” Shantae explained.

Sky held out her hand nervously to the zombie girl. “N-nice to meet you,” she stammered.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” Rotty asked.

Sky gulped. “G-go ahead.”

“What do you have against me? I know I’m a zombie, but I ain’t gonna eat you,” Rotty pointed out.

Sky sighed. “Shantae, Bolo. You guys know my dad, right?” she asked her friends.

“Yeah?” Shantae asked while Bolo merely nodded.

“He’s… not my original father,” Sky began, tears dripping down her cheeks. “My mom married him after… after my original dad died.”

“Sky, I’m so sorry,” Shantae spoke, wrapping her arms around her friend while Bolo did the same. Rotty, meanwhile, stayed back.

“My father was out working one night in the desert when a herd of zombies came and… ate him,” Sky cried. “All that was left was his

skeleton…" She turned to Rotty, wiping away tears. "That's why I'm scared of you. I know you claim you're a good person, but I have no way of knowing that. You could just be playing us and biding your time."

"She's not," Shantae insisted.

"How do you know that?" Sky asked. "You trust everybody."

"Maybe, but I'm certain she's a good person," Shantae retorted. "She does have an urge to eat people, but she can control it."

Sky's eyes widened in fear. "Look," Rotty began. "I wasn't born a zombie. Somebody brought me back to life like this. I have more control over myself than your average zombie. I just need to drink coffee every once in a while and the urges go away. I didn't ask for any of this, but I'm making the best of a bad situation. So please, just give me a chance."

Sky let out a sigh. "Okay," she conceded. "I'll give you a chance. But only one."

"Thank you," Rotty said, shedding a single tear from her left eye.

Shantae clasped her hands together. "This is great!" she exclaimed, happy to see her friends finally getting along.

"So uh, now what?" Bolo questioned.

"You guys like Desert Blaze?" Rotty asked.

"I do!" Bolo announced.

"I've read it," Sky stated. "It's alright."

"It's my favorite comic," Shantae stated proudly. "Do you guys have a favorite character? Mine's Doreen."

The quartet discussed the comic's contents for hours until they were too exhausted to continue. Sky and Bolo were soon heading to the door when Rotty stopped the former. "Hey, Sky," Rotty spoke. "Want to hang out tomorrow?"

Sky fidgeted for a moment, but took a deep breath to calm herself. “I guess we can give it a try. Come to my place. Shantae can text you the directions.”

“Thanks,” Rotty said, grinning. As she watched Sky and Bolo leave, she turned back to Shantae. “I should probably get going. My brothers want me back at the wagon for a change.”

“Understandable,” Shantae agreed. “You should come to the festival tomorrow.”

“I will,” Rotty replied, throwing out a peace sign as she headed out.

I need to do something before that, Shantae suddenly remembered. *This isn't going to be easy.*

The next day, Rotty knocked on the door to Sky’s home, waiting patiently for the bird woman to open the door. Instead, an older woman that resembled Sky opened the door. “Hello!” she greeted cheerfully, shaking Rotty’s hand almost violently. “I’m Avery! And you are?”

“Rotty,” the zombie girl said, pulling her hand back.

“Come on inside,” Avery said, guiding her into Sky’s home. There, Rotty noticed Sky sitting on her couch, covering her face in embarrassment.

“You must be Sky’s girlfriend,” Avery spoke. “I knew she’d find her special somebody at some point.”

“Girlfriend?” Sky and Rotty questioned simultaneously.

“Is she not?” Avery asked.

“No,” Sky replied, picking her head up.

“Oh,” Avery murmured. “Well, you two could make a cute couple!”

“Mom, it’s not like that,” Sky insisted. “And you say that about

everyone I meet. I don't even like girls!"

"Sorry, you know how mothers are," Avery said with a shrug. "Whatever happened to that Bolo fellow?"

"He's not into me," Sky groaned, beginning to blush.

"Really? He doesn't know what he's missing," Avery replied.

"Mom, can you please go now?" Sky pleaded.

"Fine, fine," Avery sighed, heading towards the front door. "But you'd better clean up next time. Otherwise I'm making you move back in."

After the door shut behind Avery, Sky quickly locked the door and let out a massive groan. "I *hate* when she does this," she complained. "I had to deal with her for an hour before you got here."

"You gonna be okay?" Rotty asked.

"Maybe after I get something to drink," Sky sighed.

"Hey, how come she didn't react to me being a zombie?" Rotty asked.

"She's completely oblivious," Sky replied. "And even if she could tell you're a zombie, she'd probably think you're one of the 'nice' ones."

"I see," Rotty stated, unsure how else to react to this information. "You don't have to answer, but I noticed something. When your mom brought up Bolo, you blushed. Any reason why?"

Sky sighed. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

"My lips are sealed."

"I… like Bolo."

"Awww…" Rotty murmured, putting her palms to her cheeks.

"But it's complicated," Sky explained. "I think I only realized it recently. When I was watching over him when he was injured, taking care of him. I really wanted to make sure he was safe, you know?

We'd been through a lot the past few days. I didn't want to lose him."

"I know the feeling," Rotty replied. "I feel the same way about Shantae."

"Wait, you have a crush on Shantae?" Sky questioned.

"I told her how I feel," Rotty replied.

"And?"

"It's complicated," Rotty explained. "We're taking things slow right now, getting to know each other."

"Do you think she likes you?" Sky asked.

"I think she might," Rotty stated. "But I don't really know."

"I'm starting to see why you care about her so much," Sky observed.

Rotty nodded. "She's my best friend," she stated. "I just want to see her okay."

Sky nodded in understanding.

"Got a question for you," Rotty stated. "How would you feel if you asked Bolo out and he said no?"

"Funny you mention that," Sky replied. "He actually asked me out, and I turned him down."

"How come?" Rotty asked.

"It was before I found out I had feelings for him and I didn't want to ruin our friendship if things went south," Sky explained. "You see, Bolo has this little problem with him. Every time he sees a girl he finds pretty, he freezes up like a statue and it takes a while to snap him out of it."

"I don't suppose there's any way to fix that," Rotty replied.

"A girl he met recently has offered to help him," Sky explained.

“Well, that works,” Rotty stated. “What’s her deal?”

“She has a crush on him, and the feeling is mutual,” Sky sighed. “She wants to help him so that, in her words, anybody can date him without a problem.”

“Sounds like that would benefit everyone,” Rotty replied.

“Yeah, but I feel like she’s just doing it to date him,” Sky stated. “At least, that’s what it feels like to me.”

“Hey, how come you never tried to help Bolo with his little problem?” Rotty asked.

“I tried when we were younger, but nothing worked,” Sky sighed. “I don’t know how to solve a problem like that. I’m not even sure this girl does either.”

“I feel like you’re afraid of her,” Rotty assumed.

“What do you mean?” Sky asked.

“You want to date Bolo, but you’re afraid if this girl solves his problem, he’ll go to her instead, right?”

Sky sighed once more. “Yeah,” she conceded. “I do want to date him, but I can’t do that unless he fixes his problem. And if he does, it’ll be because of that girl.”

“Let me present a question to you,” Rotty suggested. “What if it’s less that you’re mad about not dating Bolo, but rather you’re mad about not having a relationship?”

“I guess that’s possible,” Sky admitted. “I do rush into things sometimes. I once tried to flirt with a guy over twice my age. He turned me down, telling me I should find somebody my own age.”

“Honestly, I don’t think you need anybody to be happy,” Rotty explained. “Maybe you just need another friend. It seems like you’re trying to fill a void in your heart, especially since you lost your dad and your mom is pretty overbearing. You want any kind of love, not so much romantic love.”

Sky let out a sigh. “You really think so?”

“It’s just a theory, but that’s what I think,” Rotty explained.

“Maybe you have a point,” Sky conceded. “I could use another friend, and maybe you’re it.”

“Thanks,” Rotty replied. “So, what are you going to do about Bolo?”

“I think I’m gonna help that girl out with fixing his problem,” Sky replied. “Make sure she really is right for Bolo, you know?”

“Don’t want him to get screwed over, I get it,” Rotty stated.

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow about it,” Sky replied.

“I do have another question,” Rotty spoke. “How do you pay for your apartment, anyway?”

“I’m a waitress at a nearby restaurant,” Sky explained. “I had asked to take a couple days off to help out Shantae during the Elemental Stone fiasco.”

“Me and my brothers do odd jobs here and there, and that keeps us going,” Rotty replied.

“You have brothers?” Sky questioned.

“Yeah, they’re zombies too, but they’re the way I am,” Rotty explained.

“That’s good,” Sky replied.

“So, what did you want to do today?” Rotty asked.

“Well, I’ve got the day off, so we can do whatever really. Hmm… want to see my bird collection?”

“Sure,” Rotty answered, smiling brightly. “I love stuff that can fly.”

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Earlier that same day…

Bolo entered Emma's home, where he was immediately greeted by a happy Wobble Bell. Bolo bent down to pet the dog, receiving numerous licks in return. He noticed that the room was much cleanlier than it was a couple days ago, with chairs and tables now present for customers.

"Glad you could come over," Emma said to Bolo before she tossed a bone over to her dog.

"Anytime," Bolo replied. "So, how are you going to help me with my girl problem?"

"Patience and concentration," Emma explained. "Let's take note of what you can and can't do. You're able to hold a conversation with me, so that's good."

"Yeah, once I'm prepared to see a pretty girl, I'm pretty calm," Bolo explained. "It's when I get surprised that I get stunned."

"Interesting," Emma murmured. "That gives me an idea."

"What is it?" Bolo questioned.

"How about some meditation?" Emma suggested.

"That's it?" Bolo questioned.

"If this plan doesn't work, then nothing will," Emma insisted.

"That doesn't sound very encouraging," Bolo murmured.

"I think if we combine it with some of my food, it should do the trick,"

Emma suggested. “Meditation on an empty stomach, that’s a no-go. Give me a few.” She headed into the kitchen and cooked up a quick snack. Bringing back a plate with some food on it, she handed it to Bolo. “Bacon and egg sandwich. My treat.”

“Thanks,” Bolo said, munching down on the sandwich. “So how does this meditation work?”

“You’re going to close our eyes and focus entirely on your problems. A little mantra I use is this: ‘This will not break me.’ Imagine some pretty girls and say that mantra every time one comes into your head.”

“Okay,” Bolo said, sitting down and crossing his legs. He shut his eyes and his vision became completely cloaked by attractive women. *This will not break me,* he said to himself, refusing to freeze up. *This will NOT break me. THIS WILL NOT BREAK ME!* He opened his eyes and let out a deep breath.“Now what?”

“That’s… it,” Emma murmured.

“That… felt pretty anticlimactic,” Bolo commented. “How do I know if it works?”

“Imagine the prettiest girls you’ve ever seen,” Emma stated. “Have it come to you fast so you can’t prepare for it.”

Bolo closed his eyes. Doing as Emma commanded, he imagined Risky in his head. The sudden shock of seeing her surprisingly did not phase him. He then imagined Harmony, and nothing happened. He opened his eyes. “Hey, I think it worked.”

“That’s great!” Emma exclaimed, clasping her hands together.

“I can’t believe it just worked like that,” Bolo commented.

“Well, people say my food can solve any problem,” Emma chuckled nervously.

“Even still, I don’t know how I can thank you,” Bolo stated.

“Well, I could use some help in the kitchen,” Emma replied. “Do you

know how to cook?”

Bolo nodded. “It’s how I take care of myself.”

“Great! You can be my first employee! I’ll pay you well, I promise! The workday’s about to begin and I’ve been getting more customers than I can count.”

The front door opened, letting in a familiar zombie. “Heya, Bolo,” Rotty greeted, waving. “And… uh…”

“Emma,” the blonde girl replied, somewhat irritated. “My name is literally on the sign.”

“You got it, Emma,” Rotty replied. “Honestly, I was going to call you Chef Girl.”

“Hm… not bad,” Emma admitted. “Although I’m not officially a chef. I think I need to go to a school for that.” She immediately snapped her finger. “Oh hey, the meditation is working,” she said, looking at Bolo.

“But I don’t find Rotty pretty…” Bolo murmured.

“Oh…”

“No need to apologize,” Rotty replied, slightly amused despite not understanding what they were talking about. “I’m just here for some coffee.”

“So, how do you two know each other?” Emma asked.

“We’re both friends with Shantae,” Bolo answered.

“Oh, I know her,” Emma replied. “She’s my friend too.”

“When did that happen?” Bolo asked.

“Yesterday,” Emma answered.

“Oh. Ok. Hey, weren’t you going to hang out with Sky later?” Bolo suddenly asked Rotty.

“I am,” Rotty replied. “After some coffee.”

“You got it,” Emma stated, heading into the kitchen. “Bolo, do you know how to make coffee?”

“I can’t live without it, so yes,” Bolo replied, following her into the kitchen.

“Great, you make it so I can gauge your skills.”

“You got it.”

“You know, you two really make a cute couple,” Rotty commented, making the duo blush.

“Couple?” the two asked simultaneously.

“We’re… not a couple,” Emma stated, still blushing.

“I thought we were working on our way into that,” Bolo said, walking out of the kitchen with the coffee.

“I mean, we are, but we gotta take it one step at a time,” Emma said, following him.

“Reminds me of me and Shantae,” Rotty observed.

“You like Shantae?” Emma asked.

“Who doesn’t like Shantae?” Bolo interjected, handing Rotty her coffee.

“I don’t think she means it like that,” Emma pointed out.

“Are you saying she’s got a crush on Shantae?” Bolo guessed.

“Bingo,” Rotty replied, finishing her coffee almost immediately. “That is some *good* coffee.”

“Oh uh, congrats,” Bolo said, unsure how else to react. “Sorry. I don’t know a lot of people who have a crush on my best friend. This is pretty new to me.”

“It’s okay,” Rotty replied. “I envy you two,” she chuckled. “You both know you like each other and you’re working your way up. I don’t

even know if Shantae likes me."

"She might," Bolo said optimistically. "You two get along pretty well."

"I hope so," Rotty said. "I'm okay if we don't end up together, but it would make my day a lot sweeter, you know?"

"That makes sense," Emma replied.

"I hope it works out," Bolo stated. "If it goes all the way, I want to be the best man at your wedding."

"Oh uh, sure," Rotty replied. "For Shantae, I'm guessing?"

"Yep," Bolo replied. "She's like a sister to me."

Rotty took a quick glance at her phone, checking the time. "I'd better get going. Don't want to keep Sky waiting," she explained. "See you two later."

"So that was your first customer," Emma observed. "I think you handled it pretty well."

Bolo grinned. "Thanks."

Emma smiled back. "Keep up the good work."

Shantae entered Mimic's workshop, finding her uncle working on another gadget of his. He was so engrossed in his work he didn't notice Shantae was even there. "Uncle," she greeted him, startling the older man. *I've put this off for too long,* she thought.

"Shantae?" he asked, spinning around. He noticed she had a serious look on her face, something he rarely saw. "Shantae, I'm so sorry," he quickly apologized. "I should've found another way to stop him."

Shantae sighed. "I'm not here about that," she stated, trying to hold in the tears. "I want to know something. When I was collecting the stones, I learned that Mom was killed and Dad died of cancer. I

know I was probably too young to understand what was going on at the time, but now I have to know. Where are they buried?"

Mimic took a deep breath before he gave his answer. "I buried them in Spider Forest, where your mother was killed. They're buried right now to each other. I can show you where it is."

Shantae nodded. "Please."

Shantae bent down to read the tombstones in front of her. "Ana. Karnov," she spoke, tears gushing out her eyes. "Mom. Dad. You were here this whole time and I never realized it." She remembered having run past a tombstone when she first met up with Bolo on her journey to collect the stones.

"I'm sorry, Shantae," Mimic apologized, standing behind her. "I should have told you sooner, but I thought it was better if you believed they were off saving the day. I felt like it gave you more hope than telling you that they'd died."

Shantae stood up and sighed. "Can't change the past," she murmured. "I just wish I'd gotten to know them better, especially Dad. I met him… in the Village of Lost Souls. He made me wish I'd had him in my life. He was so nice and caring. I didn't want it to end." Mimic wrapped his arms around his niece, hoping that provided at least some comfort to her. "I wish my mother hadn't been a Genie," Shantae murmured, shocking Mimic. "I just wish I had a normal family. One that could be there for me."

"Shantae, I don't know how you can ever trust me again, but I promise you, I'll do my best to be there for you from now on."

"Thanks, Uncle," Shantae whispered. "I understand why you chose the stone over me. You thought I could handle him. But it still hurts. Ever since the shot, I've had trouble telling what people were saying. I've had to get close just to hear them, or hope they're speaking up like Rotty does. Everything sounds so quiet now. It makes it hard to tell what's going on."

“I’m sorry, Shantae,” Mimic stated. “I wish I had found another way to stop him.”

“I think it’s time I went home,” Shantae spoke, pulling herself away from Mimic’s embrace. Before she could dance and transform into the bird form to make her departure, she saw a woman standing before her. “Who are you?” the young half-Genie questioned. Shantae noticed something peculiar about the woman, besides her bright green hair. She had pointed ears. “Are you another half-Genie?”

“Half-Genie?” the woman questioned. “Is that what they call you?”

“Should I know you?” Shantae asked.

“Probably not, but I’ve been hearing good things about you, young Shantae. I am Esmeralda, queen of the Genies.”

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

“Queen?” Shantae questioned before she immediately recalled this person. *She was the one the Pirate Master tried to challenge.*

“Yes,” Esmeralda spoke. “You’re the one who prevented the Pirate Master from escaping Ana’s prison.”

“Thanks, but it really wasn’t me who did it,” Shantae replied.

“Oh?” Esmeralda questioned.

“It was a team effort,” Shantae explained. “My friends and uncle got rid of the stones. It wasn’t just me. And could you move a bit closer? That battle with the Pirate Master kinda left me half-deaf.”

“You poor thing,” Esmeralda spoke up, moving closer. “Either way, you took up the challenge and you succeeded,” Esmeralda replied. “I believe that is worthy of praise.”

“How did you find out about me?” Shantae asked. “And how come you didn’t step in to help?”

“I know about you because of our magical security footage,” Emeralda explained. “By the time we took notice of you, it was too late to help. It astonished me most how there are still any children of Genies around.”

“How many of us are there?” Shantae asked.

“From what we’ve been able to find recently, four, including yourself.”

“Wait, that means there’s one I haven’t met,” Shantae realized. “Who is it?”

“I’m afraid she’s on another island,” Esmeralda explained. “Her name is Zapple and she lives on Paradise Island. She’s gotten a bit

of an ego from what we've seen and could use come cooling down. We figured you and the other half-Genies could help her out."

"Wait, if you know all about her, why not try to help her yourself?" Shantae questioned.

Esmeralda chuckled. "I'm extremely busy, you know. You're lucky I have enough time to talk to you. Most of the Genies back in our realm are powerless thanks to the Pirate Master, so it's becoming harder to defend the galaxy. We are a generation of one. The magic tree that created us all has run out of energy, so no more Genies can be created. You and the remaining magical Genies are the only ones capable of passing down their magic to a next generation."

"Putting a lot of pressure on me here," Shantae pointed out. "And isn't it possible to share your magic with other Genies?"

"Only from a pure Genie to a half-Genie is it possible," Esmeralda stated. Holding out her hand, she opened a green portal in front of her. "It's time for me to go."

"Wait," Shantae interjected, stopping Esmeralda from entering the portal. "Is there a way for healing magic to safely mix together with wish magic?"

"It's possible, assuming you already have it combined in your system," Esmeralda admitted. "Wish magic is incredibly hard to use and is based on one's emotions, not so much training or skill. I'm sure you can use it someday, Shantae." She exited through the portal, closing it behind her.

"I think it's time we went home," Mimic suggested. "Why were you asking her that stuff?"

"I'm planning on turning Rottytops and her brothers back to human," Shantae explained. "I learned during my adventure that a friend of Mom's gave me some of her healing magic. If I can combine that with my wish magic, I'll be able to heal them."

"Smart thinking," Mimic replied. "Let's hope that it works."

"Right now though, I need to prepare for that festival the mayor is

setting up for me," Shantae said excitedly. *I'm going to give that town a piece of my mind…*

Shantae walked throughout Scuttle Town, finding several citizens cheering her name and tossing her free gems.

"Finally, you did something worthy of a Genie," she could one person shout, making her left eye twitch.

"Genies rock!" another voice called out, making her want to crawl up into a ball.

She noticed Holly standing against the wall of a building, making the half-Genie approach the young woman. "What are you doing here?" Shantae asked. "I almost never see you around."

"Just thought I'd survey the area," Holly answered. "In case somebody tries to crash the festival."

"Thanks," Shantae said, smiling.

"It must feel pretty good, huh?" Holly assumed.

"Huh?"

"You get a whole festival to yourself," Holly pointed out. "And for what? Being a half-Genie?"

"To be honest, it was for saving the town," Shantae said sheepishly. "And what do you have against half-Genies?"

"Look around you," Holly replied. "You're getting praised for what you are rather than what you actually did. You're being placed above the rest of us for just existing."

"Hey, I didn't ask for this," Shantae pushed back. "I don't like it anymore than you do. I didn't even save the town by myself. My friends and uncle helped with most of it. And yet I'm the one getting the praise. Honestly, I was going to speak my mind when it came to the big speech tonight."

“Oh…” Holly murmured.

“I don’t even like being a half-Genie,” Shantae continued. “It just gives everyone expectations for me, expectations I can’t live up to unless I’m using magic. So excuse me if I’m not going to deal with your *stupid* attitude.” She began stomping away, only to hear Holly call out her name. “What?!”

“I’m sorry,” Holly apologized, surprising the half-Genie. “I… I didn’t realize how you felt about things.”

Shantae let out a sigh before she continued walking. She climbed the stairs to the podium in the center of town where the mayor stood next to a microphone. “We’re here to celebrate the victory Shantae has achieved over the pirate menace,” the mayor spoke, trying not to yawn. “And here she is. Shantae, your favorite Guardian Genie.”

Shantae walked up to the microphone, tapping on it. “Can everybody hear me?” she asked, lowering her voice. “That battle with the pirate kinda left me half-deaf.” She noticed Rottytops, Sky, Mimic, and Bolo standing in the crowd, bringing a smile to her face. “I just want to say thanks for this,” she spoke into the microphone. “And I do have something important to say.” She took a deep breath before making her statement. “I’m happy you guys finally appreciate me, but is this really what it takes to make you people happy?”

The crowd looked at each other in confusion. “You guys only care about me when I’m saving the town or using new magic. You all have this expectation for me to be great and when it turns out I’m just like you, you’re just disappointed in me. I’ve wanted the respect of this town for so long, but not like this. I want to be respected for my own actions, not because of my bloodline. And I hope one day, I can have that kind of respect.”

“Ungrateful!” a voice shouted from the crowd, as several boos followed. The crowd quickly dispersed, leaving only Shantae’s friends behind.

Rotty, however, began clapping and cheering. “Great speech, Shantae!” she shouted, making the half-Genie grin. “You show ‘em what for!” Shantae’s other friends along with Holly, standing from the

corner of a nearby building, began clapping too.

The mayor scratched his head, confused beyond measure. “So, are you still going to work for the town?” he asked Shantae.

“I’ll do it,” Shantae assured him. “Even if this town hates me, one day I will get them to respect me for who I am, not what I am.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” the mayor replied, walking away.

Shantae groaned, wanting to scream at the mayor but she managed to hold herself back. She exited the stage via the staircase and met up with her friends. “That was a pretty good speech,” Sky congratulated her.

“Better than I could’ve done,” Bolo stated.

“I’m glad you spoke your mind,” Mimic chimed in.

“Same here!” Rotty exclaimed, wrapping her arms around her best friend.

“Thanks, you guys,” she spoke up. “Especially you, Rotty. You really helped me get through the past few days.” Shantae pressed her lips against Rotty’s cold cheek, making the zombie blush and surprising the others. “I appreciate it.”

“Does this mean…?” Rotty asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Shantae replied, pressing her lips against Rotty’s. The two embraced, unbeknownst to either of them that Rotty’s skin was beginning to chip apart. Her skin reverted to a pale hue and her hair turned gray. The stitches in her arm and leg popped off like magic. When Rotty’s eyes opened, her vision became more blurry than it had previously.

“Why is everything so blurry?” Rotty asked.

“Rotty, you’re… human?!” Shantae questioned.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Vera laid down in bed, staring at the ceiling. She tussled around in the bed, fighting desperately to find a comfortable spot to rest. As she did so, she felt her body bump into something under the covers. The half-Genie could hear the sound of whimpering, making her tear the covers off herself. Before her rested a small infant, having the same skin tone as herself. "W-who a-are you?" Vera asked squeamishly, slowly pulling herself out of the bed.

The baby did not make any sounds, instead locking eyes with Vera. The half-Genie paused her own frantic movements, studying the newborn's calm demeanor. *Where did you come from?* Vera thought worriedly. In the corner of Vera's eye rested a mirror on the wall. Vera looked away from the baby for a moment, observing her appearance. Before her stood not a teenager, but an adult woman in her thirties. *Is... that... me?* Vera asked herself, rubbing her face with her left hand. She looked down to see her hands had become slightly bigger than they had before, with her fingernails looking brittle.

Staring back at the reflection showed a woman wearing the same clothes as Vera had the night prior. However, the pajamas clearly did not fit, constricting her body not unlike a snake trapping its prey. The woman's face began to slowly morph, soon becoming a face all too recognizable by Vera. *Aja?* the half-Genie asked, taking a frightened step back.

Vera shut her eyes for a moment, only to see her mother again once she reopened them. She tugged at her neck, finding her collar slowly depriving her of oxygen. Vera looked back at the child, who was still staring at her. She could not tell if the baby was male or female, but she was certain of one thing: the infant seemed to be incapable of blinking. Even though an entire minute had gone by,

the baby's neverending gaze had defied its need to blink.

To avoid any further judgement from the infant, Vera ran into the hallway and called out, "Mom! Mognes!" She looked around in the hallway, hearing no signs of life. "Molly? Nora?" she called again, her voice now louder. "Where are you guys?!" Tiny footsteps echoed behind her, making Vera slowly crane her neck back. *How?* Vera questioned, her heart now beating faster than it already had been.

The infant was walking perfectly normal, as if it were much older than it actually was. It pulled its head up, locking eyes with Vera once more. "M-ma... ma?" it barely managed to say, as if its voice was choking on something.

Vera immediately bolted out of the hallway. Without looking back, she dashed through every room in the house. There were no signs of life whatsoever, making Vera zip out of the house. She sped through the nearby town, no anymore alive than her own home. Eventually, she found herself standing on the beach. *How... did I... get here?* Vera panted, having not seen where the town ended and the beach began. She plopped down, curling up into a ball in the recesses of the sand. *Who was that kid? It looked so much like me, like... Aja,* Vera remembered with a shudder. *And where was its dad?*

In the matter of a simple blink, her visage became blurred by something all too familiar to her. Vera pulled herself up out of shock, seeing that the baby had somehow managed to catch up with her. The baby's frozen stare did not falter, craning its neck as if wanting a better view of Vera's despair. "Ma... ma..." it repeated.

Vera's eyes snapped shut, pushing her hand out to create some distance between the two of them. Instead, she heard something make a splash sound, forcing her eyes wide open. The infant was gone, making Vera's heart rate skyrocket. "Where did it go?!" the half-Genie shouted, her body panicking in a cold sweat.

She put one foot forward, almost heading into the water without hesitation. But then, she saw something rise out of the water: a green-skinned girl struggling to keep her head above the surface. "Rotty?!" Vera shouted, taking another step to get closer to the

zombie. As she did so, she felt her legs freeze up. Nothing had shackled her down, but her legs refused to cooperate. She fell flat on her face, her chin smashing into the now stone ground. She did not understand how the ground had become so rugged, but that was unimportant. Her top priority was Rotty.

Vera attempted to pull her left arm forward, but that had become immobile as well. *What is going on?!* she had wanted to scream. Attempting the same action with her right arm, the half-Genie bawled into tears after reaching the same result. *Rotty... I'm so sorry...*

Just as she had thought of those words, she noticed Rotty's head sinking into the water right as something new crept above the surface. It was the infant once again, never taking its expressionless stare off Vera. The newborn's mouth slowly opened, as if it had been waiting to say this: "Why... did you leave me... Mama?"

Vera's eyes snapped open, yanking her head off her pillow while still hyperventilating. She pulled her covers off her, searching the bed for any signs of life. However, there were none except for her. Vera rubbed her head anxiously as her breathing began to stabilize.

Pulling herself out of bed, she groggily made her way out of her bedroom and into the hallway. *How long did I sleep for?* the half-Genie wondered, feeling as though she had not slept nearly long enough. She remembered that she had stared at her alarm clock for a long time, hoping that would put her to sleep.

The half-Genie wearily made her way into the kitchen before she noticed her younger sister sitting by herself at the kitchen table. The lobster girl was staring over a bowl of cereal, miserably picking up the spoon to feed herself. "Nora..." Vera murmured hesitantly.

The lobster teen looked up, her expression more glum than Vera's. "Y-yeah...?" she asked innocently.

"Where... is everyone?" Vera asked cautiously, slowly taking a step forward.

"Sleeping," Nora murmured, placing the spoon full of cereal in her mouth. "I was hungry, so I... wanted to eat..." The lobster girl looked up to her older sister. "Don't tell Mognes. She said she was gonna make us something big for breakfast. If she knew I already ate..."

Vera's concerned expression changed, her lips curving upward. "Secret's safe with me, sis."

Nora's expression now changed to match Vera's. "Thanks, Vera."

Vera walked over to her sister, pulling out a chair. "Can I sit with you?" Vera asked shyly.

Nora nodded. "Sure."

Vera took her seat, letting out a deep breath. "What time is it anyway?"

"I think... seven?"

"That's pretty early," Vera winced.

Nora put her spoon down, letting it swim in the sea of milk. "D-did you have a nightmare too?" the lobster asked.

Vera's body tensed up, her face beginning to sweat. "I... guess so..." the half-Genie sighed. "Is that why you're really up?"

"One reason," Nora admitted, her eyes beginning to moisten. "I really was hungry, so I thought eating might help me calm down too."

"What did you see?" Vera asked.

"T-tell me your dream first," Nora said hesitantly. "I... need time to... describe it."

Vera took a deep breath, her thoughts swirling in her mind. *I guess I can tell her about the first part. Just keep Rotty out of it, or she might badger me about it.* The half-Genie briefly opened her mouth, only to shut it just as quickly. *Come on. You can tell her the first part,* Vera convinced herself. "I saw... a baby..." she barely managed to say.

"Like a newborn?" Nora asked.

"Maybe?" Vera replied, equally as confused. "It was in my bed while I was trying to sleep. It just kept... looking at me... It wouldn't even blink..."

"Whose baby was it?" Nora questioned.

"M-mine," Vera murmured, making Nora's eyes widen in shock. "I think. It looked like me. It scared me, then I saw a mirror. I was... an adult. And then my face looked like my mom..."

"You mean Aja?" Nora asked.

"Y-yes," Vera answered. "The baby called me Mama. It freaked me out, so I ran out of the room. I couldn't find anybody else in our home, or our town. Then I was on the beach... and the baby was beside me..." Vera's lips trembled, burying her face in her hands. "I just wanted some space... and I... I..."

"Vera, what happened?" Nora asked anxiously, placing a hand on Vera's shoulder.

"I pushed it into the water..." Vera whimpered, her eyes becoming moist. "I didn't mean to, and it started drowning. The last thing I heard was... it asking me why I abandoned it..."

"I think I get it," Nora stated.

"You do?" Vera asked, pulling up her head.

"Vera, you're not the same as Aja," Nora said sternly. "You would never abandon anyone."

"I'm scared of being like her..." Vera whimpered. "She didn't seem to have any friends outside of Shantae's mom. I rarely talk to anybody outside of this house. I'm worried I'm gonna be distant with my own family when I get older."

"Vera, that's not going to happen," Nora insisted, placing both hands on Vera's shoulders. "We'll work through this. You have your whole life ahead of you, so don't give up. I'm always here for you, sis. We

all are."

Vera's lips slowly began to curve upward as she rubbed her wet eyes. "Thanks, Nora."

"Anytime, sis."

"So... did you wanna talk about your nightmare now?"

"Oh, I guess I could," Nora said hesitantly, pulling herself back. "Talking helps, right? That's what they say on TV. So... uh..."

"Nora, you don't have to," Vera stated.

"No, it's fine," Nora sighed. "If you can, I can too."

"Then, what is it?" Vera asked.

"M-my dad..." Nora whispered, looking away from her sister. "Or like... a purple ghost. It looked like him... but not also him. He... wanted to hurt me... and Mom..."

Vera pulled herself closer, wrapping her arms around her younger sister. "He's not here," the half-Genie promised. "Look, what happened wasn't your fault. Your dad... something controlled him. It wasn't him anymore." Vera briefly pulled away from her sister, questioning the veracity of her own words. While Harmony had said Jack had been corrupted, Vera had no idea how much of Jack was still there. "I... think," the half-Genie let slip.

Nora rubbed her wet eyes, letting out a depressed sigh. "What really happened?" she asked, making Vera look back at her.

"I don't really know," Vera murmured. "Harmony said he and some other people were corrupted by some dark magic, then they were locked up in the Genie Realm. Nobody was allowed to hear from their families." The half-Genie looked down at her feet, almost embarrassed by her lack of knowledge on the topic. "I... don't know why."

"I-is that what you guys talked about after I left the room?" Nora asked weakly.

Vera gave a hesitant nod. "Yes. Molly asked about it, so I told her. Neither of us wanted to tell you until you were ready."

Nora rubbed her head while she let out an exhausted groan. "Do you think... my dad was still in there? Was it really the dark magic that made him evil?"

Vera refused to look up, barely mumbling her answer. "I don't know. I don't even know why only Harmony's parents bothered trying to help him."

"Then how did he come back?" Nora asked.

"I don't know how he came back," Vera admitted. "But he's gone. His host body was destroyed, so he faded away with it."

"D-do you ever feel... responsible for... something out of your control?" Nora asked. "I keep telling myself, I could have helped Dad." The lobster teen rubbed her moist eyes, letting out a somber chuckle. "It probably wouldn't have worked, but... I feel like it could have."

"I do," Vera said, her face beginning to tear up. *Should I really tell her?*

"You do?"

Vera looked away for a moment, rubbing her moist eyes. *I can't keep this in forever, can I? Maybe... no, I gotta tell someone.* Vera looked back at her younger sister, taking a deep breath. "Promise not to tell anyone?"

"I promise," Nora replied with a faint nod and smile. "...unless I forget."

"That's encouraging," Vera snorted, rubbing her eyes once more. "Well, the truth has to come out somehow."

"What do you mean?"

"You know Rotty?"

"Yeah, why?" Nora said innocently.

"She was also in my dream," Vera sighed. "Because... I feel like I screwed up her life."

"Why?" Nora asked. *Doesn't she barely know Rotty?* the lobster girl wondered.

"She... wasn't always green," Vera whispered. "I met her, when she was still human."

"You did? What was she like?" Nora asked inquisitively. "Wait, how does that work? I thought people were born zombies."

"She was dying," Vera began. "Her and her brothers. I freaked out and tried to save them, but... it didn't go like I wanted. They turned into zombies..."

"Ohhh," Nora murmured. "Cool."

"Why is *that* your reaction?" Vera questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, you can raise the dead," Nora said with a smile. "That's pretty cool."

"I *can't* raise the dead," Vera said sternly. "Rotty and her brothers were a special case because Aja and Shantae's mom gave each of us the other's magic."

"Wait, so you can turn into animals too?" Nora questioned.

"Uh... maybe?" Vera questioned. "I haven't really tried it. I don't really feel it in my body. Just healing magic and a bit of wish magic."

"What's wish magic?" Nora asked.

"It's from Shantae's mom," Vera stated. "It grants the user what they want most in the darkest of times. I think it helped me save Rotty and her brothers."

"You can't use it whenever you want?" Nora asked.

"No," Vera replied. "I just got lucky."

"So why do you feel bad about Rotty?" Nora asked.

"Well, people get scared of her for one," Vera pointed out. "You were scared, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Nora murmured. "But that's because I didn't really know her. She's cool now. If people are afraid of her, they should just get to know her."

"It's kinda weird," Vera admitted, rubbing her head nervously. "She likes her new body because it makes her feel like her. I didn't really get what she meant."

"Maybe she likes being green?" Nora suggested.

"I don't think that was it," Vera replied. "But that's not the problem. She has memory issues as a zombie. Can't remember anything before becoming one, and she has trouble remembering recent stuff."

"Ohhhhhhhh," Nora murmured. "I see the problem. You wanna try fixing that?"

"I do," Vera confirmed. "But I'd need to get both Shantae and Rotty here."

"Then let's do that," Nora suggested. "I can tell it's eating at you, sis."

"You really think I should?" Vera asked. "I'm not sure if I can get it to work the way I want it to."

"Totally," Nora said, nodding like a bobblehead. "If this can help you with your problems, that's a good thing, right?"

"One would hope," Vera said with a chuckle.

"Maybe I could use that summoning circle from before," Nora suggested. "Would save time."

"Let me text them first," Vera replied, pulling out her phone. "Oh, and maybe don't tell Mom or Mognes, please."

"Why not?" Nora asked.

"Because I don't want them trying to stop me," Vera stated. "Knowing my luck, this is going to give me a major headache. So I'm gonna pretend to be sick when they wake up."

"Oh, you got it," Nora agreed. "If you really wanna look sick, get a tissue box and make it look like you've been sneezing a lot."

"Good idea," Vera stated, typing out a message. *Glad I can type fast,* the half-Genie thought, pressing the send button almost as soon as she had begun typing.

"Wait, what if Shantae or Rotty aren't available?" Nora pointed out. "I mean, it's only seven."

"Well, Rotty doesn't sleep, so that's one down," Vera pointed out, looking over her phone. "And... Shantae's up." The young half-Genie continued typing, both to Shantae and Rotty. After texting for a couple minutes, Vera let out a breath of relief, putting her phone down onto the table. "Okay, they can be here anytime. Can you get that portal ready?"

"Sure thing," Nora said with a smile.

"Alright! Done!" Nora announced, finishing the chalk circle on her bedroom floor. The lobster teen stood up proudly, admiring her work.

Vera watched over the now glowing circle, questioning how Nora came to develop her ingenuity. "How did you learn this again?" the half-Genie asked.

"I think it was from that Genie book," Nora stated, rubbing her chin to recollect her thoughts. "Oh, we should probably get that to Harmony sometime."

"Wait, if you're summoning Shantae and Rotty at the same time, that's not gonna fuse them together or something right?" Vera asked.

"You know, I never thought about it," Nora admitted, making Vera tense up. "Well I never tried bringing anybody here before!" the lobster girl pointed out, throwing her arms up into the air. At the same time, Nora spoke in an angry whisper, hoping not to wake up anybody else in their home. "With the village, I only had to imagine the location, which I did with the pictures from the Genie book. I've never imagined faces when making the circle before."

Vera sighed, rubbing her temples. "Well, we'll find out in a second if it works."

The circle's light faded, revealing four figures: Shantae, Rotty, Poe, and Abner.

"Odd, where are we?" Poe questioned, looking around.

"Rotty, what did you do?" Abner groaned. "And why is Shantae here?"

"Hey, I didn't plan for this," Rotty sighed. "I mean, I did want to go here with Shantae. You and Poe just got free tickets."

"You didn't tell them?" Shantae asked.

"Slipped my mind," Rotty said with a half-hearted shrug.

"I mean, if Vera can help you, then maybe she can help your brothers too," Shantae suggested.

Oh right, Vera thought to herself. *I forgot about her brothers!*

"Help us with what?" Abner asked.

"Uh, hi," Nora interrupted, waving her hand to catch the newcomers' attention. "You're on Paradise Island. And could you keep it down? Our moms are trying to sleep."

"Who is that?" Abner questioned.

"Oh, I-I'm Nora," the lobster girl said shyly before she pointed to the half-Genie next to her. "My sister Vera wants to help you guys. With your whole zombie thing."

Vera gave a weak nod. "I want to help you guys turn human again," the young half-Genie explained. "And fix Rotty's memory issues."

"You can do that?" Poe asked.

"Probably," Rotty replied, holding her arms behind her head in a relaxed position. "She's the one who made us zombies."

"She is?" Poe questioned in astonishment.

"I'm guessing that slipped your mind too," Abner assumed, crossing his arms.

"For once, no," Rotty said with a chuckle. "Vera asked me not to tell anyone. I didn't even know until I met her recently."

"How many people did you meet because of Shantae?" Abner asked.

"Uh... at least six," Rotty guessed. "Maybe twelve? Eh, it'll come to me."

"In that case, Rotty goes first," Abner sighed. "I'm not in any hurry to become human again."

"Why not?" Shantae asked.

"If people fear me as a zombie, I don't wanna be accepted as a human," Abner stated.

"I never thought about it like that," Shantae murmured.

"And I've never been much of a people person, I think," Abner continued. "Rotters loves people, so she'd benefit the most from fixing her memory problems."

"I could go either way," Poe replied with a shrug. "Immortality would give me all the time I need to make more discoveries. And I've never

been a romantic, so I don't need to worry about losing my partner from old age."

"That was another reason I wanted to do this," Vera admitted as she turned to Rotty. "I can't imagine you wanna be stuck the same age forever."

"I never really thought about it," Rotty murmured. "I mean, I took the parts from people a bit older than me. But I guess the magic kinda reverted them back to my actual age. I don't know how it works." The zombie girl rubbed her chin, pondering the ramifications of her immortality. "I guess that would look kinda awkward if I ever got married," Rotty admitted with a chuckle, turning her head to Shantae. "Hey, Shantae. If I ever tie the knot, you wanna be my maid of honor?"

Shantae's cheeks turned crimson as the half-Genie giggled. "Sure, Rotty."

"So will I feel normal again?" Rotty asked, turning to Vera. "Like will I need to eat or drink stuff again? Will I still need coffee?"

"If it works, then maybe," Vera replied. "But you probably won't need to drink coffee unless you want to."

"Wait, why coffee?" Nora interjected.

Rotty let out a sigh. *Shouldn't have asked that...*

"We need coffee to keep our minds straight," Poe explained. "Otherwise... we might act like mindless zombies."

Rotty tensed up, worried Nora was going to begin screaming again. *Poe, why'd you have to blurt that out?* she had wanted to say.

Nora's eye twitched as her entire body shuddered. "Wonderful..." she winced, turning to Vera. "Maybe you can help them out with that too?"

"That would be good actually," Abner agreed. "I could care less about being human again, but not needing coffee would be good."

"It would certainly take a load off our shoulders," Poe said with a grin.

"Wait. Would I feel physical pain again?" Rotty asked suddenly. "Like, could I actually die?"

"I don't know," Vera said with a confused shrug. "I didn't think this through. I guess we could add that to the list for the wish magic?"

"Wish magic?" Shantae questioned, thinking back to what her father had told them. "You really think that will work? I've never tried that before."

"We both share magic from each other's mothers," Vera stated. "If we can combine them together, it should help us give Rotty and her brothers what we want most for them."

"Maybe Serena's book can help you guys too," Nora suggested, walking behind her bed. Picking up a weighty book full of hundreds of pages, she proudly held it up for all to see. "It talks about fusing magic in chapter five."

"That could work. Do you know what it says?" Shantae asked.

"Yep, I have that chapter memorized," Nora stated. "For the magic to combine, it's a temporary process. So your magic will be fused for a minute at most. In that minute, you'll need to use that combined magic because you won't be able to combine again for half an hour."

"In that case, we should probably get it right on the first try," Vera replied. "But how do we fuse the magic?"

"Well, it's easier if you both do the same thing to activate your magic," Nora suggested.

"Like dancing?" Shantae asked, her voice almost sounding eager.

"My magic only works by touching the person I want to heal," Vera pointed out. "If we all join hands, that could make a link that heals everyone who needs it."

"And maybe the wish magic could flow through all of us at the same

time," Rotty suggested.

"A magic conduit," Poe observed.

Abner chuckled. "This feels like a therapy circle."

A light bulb appeared above Rotty's head. "Wait, if we're fixing problems, don't you wanna wish your uncle back?" the zombie girl asked, turning to Shantae.

"There's nothing I'd love more than to have Mimic back," Shantae replied, rubbing her shoulder anxiously. "But I don't know if our combined magic would be strong enough to fully bring him back. He might end up stuck where you guys are now: no memories, immortal, and always needing coffee." Her gaze looked over to Abner and Poe, then back to Rotty. "You three wouldn't take as much effort, I think. And I can't explain why, but I feel like my wish magic is only good for one wish. So I need to think of a way to help all three of you."

"So make the wish vague enough to cover all our issues?" Rotty assumed. "Maybe then... just wish for us to be able to live the lives we want? That's vague enough to fix our issues."

"I guess it's worth a shot," Shantae agreed reluctantly. "Let's start this."

Vera held out her hand, gesturing to a certain purple-haired girl. "Shantae, take my hand. That way the magic should flow from us directly into them."

Shantae nodded, taking hold of Vera's right hand with her left. Poe took Vera's left hand with his right and Abner continued the circle by holding Poe's left hand. Finally, there was Rotty, who took hold of Shantae's right hand. Shantae and Rotty locked eyes nervously with Shantae's cheeks becoming crimson and Rotty's a darker shade of green. The zombie girl looked away, hoping Shantae had not seen her faint smile. Rotty's hand was cold, but it provided an odd warmth to Shantae.The older half-Genie tightened her grip, making Rotty look back at her with a more confident grin.

Vera took a deep breath, her body beginning to glow with a bright green aura wrapping itself around her. The aura latched onto Shantae, covering her body in its translucent radiance. Once Shantae's body became covered by the aura, it clung onto Rotty and continued its path until everyone in the circle was illuminated by the green light.

Woah, Shantae thought, feeling the healing magic coursing through her veins. It almost felt like all her worries had dissipated. The magic felt familiar despite never using it before. It was like her uncle giving her a hug back when she was a child. *It's like it's always been part of me,* she thought to herself. *Could I use this on my own?*

"Okay, it seems to be working so far," Nora observed. "Shantae, try using your wish magic."

"I... don't know how to..." Shantae murmured, her hands slowly losing their grip. The green aura around her began to fade. "This isn't exactly a darkest of times..."

"Hey, maybe I can give you some encouragement to help this go right," Rotty suggested.

Shantae's face turned crimson. "Rotty, you're not kissing me," she spoke, looking down to avoid Rotty's gaze. *I thought we talked about this...*

"Wait, what?" Vera questioned. *Rotty likes Shantae?*

"I... don't think the book says anything about kissing," Nora said innocently.

Rotty let out a groan while Poe chuckled and Abner sighed. "I wasn't going to say that," the zombie girl insisted.

"You thought it," Shantae accused, her face still rosy red.

"I mean yeah," Rotty conceded. "But I wasn't going to say it. I figured you'd need something to take your mind off things after this. I wanted to buy you dinner. Just as friends. Nothing more."

Shantae let out a chuckle. "Fine," she conceded. "I could use a good

meal."

"Can we get this over with?" Abner asked.

"Yeah, sorry," Shantae said, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. In her mind, she could feel something important flowing through her. A small kernel of golden magic hidden deep within an invisible well. It felt like Shantae was swimming through darkness as the golden light floated further away. The more Shantae pushed herself forward, the farther the light became. "I can't reach it," the purple-haired girl whimpered. "I keep trying to, but I can't."

"Shantae, you can do this," Rotty assured the older half-Genie, tightening her grip on Shantae's hand. Shantae locked eyes with Rotty, her worries melting away with what she heard next: "Just do what you do best: be you." A fire was lit inside Shantae's mind, a blaze of confidence born anew. The purple-hair woman smiled, no longer blushing. She took Rotty's hand in her own, reaffirming her grip and letting the green aura flow back into herself.

"I will," Shantae stated. Lifting her arms up and down, her body began bouncing up and down in a way she hadn't before. Rotating her body around in a circle, she could feel something beginning to take her over. She hopped slightly, placing her left foot forward and right foot back. She hopped again, swapping positions with her feet before repeating the process again and again.

Everyone looked to Shantae in confusion, except for Rotty, who watched in amazement. The zombie had a goofy, albeit proud, grin on her face. Vera raised an eyebrow, struggling to keep her grip on Shantae's hand. *I know she needs to dance to do her magic, but has nobody taught her* how *to dance?* Vera judged.

Shantae's entire body shook excitedly, as a second layer of aura began to appear. This deep purple glow bounced around as Shantae did, slowly clinging onto Vera's body and then Rotty's. The purple aura was even brighter and more extensive than the green, mystifying everyone in the room. "Shantae, you're doing it!" Rotty said eagerly. "Keep it up!"

Shantae nodded, keeping her eyes closed the whole time. As she

danced, thoughts of Mimic appeared. She could see herself back when she was six years old, watching TV with her beloved uncle. The people on the TV were dancing, making a young Shantae pull herself closer to the screen. *Uncle, what are they doing?* she could hear herself asking.

They're dancing, Shantae. People do it for fun, Mimic explained.

It looks fun. Should I try it? the purple-haired child had eagerly asked.

If you want, Mimic had told her.

The young Shantae stood up, mimicking the movements of the dancers, giggling while spinning around. *Uncle, will you dance with me?*

Sure, I guess I could.

The half-Genic child held hands with her uncle, watching his fumbling attempts to match the rhythm of the dancers. Once the dancing was over, the child Shantae giggled excitedly. *Thanks, Uncle!*

The present Shantae smiled, letting the purple aura around the group expand more. *I want to help them. Please let me,* she thought, unsure who she was even asking. She could feel the aura build up like a bubble, growing with each passing second. The entire room became purple before briefly turning white like an explosion. The room's glow slowly began to fade as Vera and Shantae fell to the ground. Once the room became clear to see in again, Rotty rushed over to the weakened Shantae. In the meantime, Nora helped pick up her older sister.

"Are you okay?" Rotty asked worriedly, watching over the exhausted Shantae.

"I think," Shantae murmured. "Just give me a sec to rest."

"Vera, you still awake?" Nora said, shaking her sister. She noticed a line of blue blood streaking down Vera's forehead, making the lobster girl squeamish. "VERA!"

The younger half-Genie groaned, struggling to open her eyes. "You don't have to yell," Vera sighed, rubbing her aching cranium. She pulled her hand down, studying her wet hand covered in a blue liquid. "Blood..." she murmured, recognizing the all too familiar liquid. She had seen it soon after she had first healed Rotty and her brothers, albeit as a delayed reaction after she had moved their bodies. The sensation had knocked her out for over a week before. But now, she was able to hold onto consciousness more easily. "Nora, you got those tissues?" Vera asked, feeling like something was crushing her brain.

"Yeah, I do," Nora said, rushing over to her bed and then back to Vera. "I don't really think we can hide this."

"Is it still bleeding?" Vera asked weakly.

"Yeah, a bit," Nora said, rubbing the wound atop Vera's forehead. "I don't get how this happened. The book never said anything about it."

"Is she gonna be okay?" Shantae asked, struggling to stand up.

"I think so," Vera answered before letting out a painful grunt. "I think sharing the magic with you made it less painful for me than it usually is."

"How bad does it normally get?" Shantae questioned.

"You don't want to know," Vera murmured.

"Can't you just heal yourself?" Abner asked, looking over to Vera.

"I wish," Vera groaned as Nora guided her to the nearby bed. Vera plopped down, still holding onto her throbbing head.

"Maybe we should tell Mom or Mognes," Nora suggested shyly.

"Give me a few minutes," Vera whispered, craning her neck while struggling to keep her eyes open. "Did it... work?" she asked the zombies.

"Rotty..." Shantae realized, having regained her composure. While she had struggled to stand before, the magic drainage did not

weaken her nearly as much as Vera. "Your hair..."

"What about it?" the zombie girl asked.

"It's grown out!" Shantae announced, observing how the zombie's hair now reached past her shoulders. "It looks great!"

Rotty looked over her shoulder, almost in disbelief at what she saw. She let her fingers traverse through her hair, mystified by how smooth it felt. *It's what I always wanted...*

"It's like the magic made up for lost time," Shantae assumed. "And... did you get taller?"

"I'm not sure," Rotty admitted before she noticed her field of vision felt... higher than it did before. While she and Shantae had previously been around the same height, she felt like she now stood slightly taller than the half-Genie. "I guess I might have." She looked over to her brothers, noticing their heights were about the same. Poe had the same clean face he had before and his hunchback was gone, but Abner now had a beard. "Ab, you might wanna shave," the zombie girl snorted.

Abner rubbed his chin, noticing the hair covering his face. "I guess it did work," he murmured.

"So we're not immortal anymore?" Poe asked, rubbing his back. His posture felt more natural than it had before, finally able to stand up straight.

"I don't think so," Shantae guessed. "It's hard to explain but... I feel like you're normal now, except for being zombies. I feel it more than my own magic."

"So no more coffee?" Rotty asked.

"Nothing's stopping you from drinking it," Shantae chuckled.

"I got an idea! Hit me!" Rotty said excitedly.

"Wait, what?" Shantae asked, flabbergasted.

"I need to see if I can feel pain," Rotty stated. "I never could before."

"Fine..." Shantae murmured, curling her fingers into a fist. "Rotty... I don't wanna do this," the half-Genie stated, releasing her fist.

"I'll do it," Abner sighed, slamming his left first into Rotty's elbow without any hesitation.

"OW!" Rotty shouted. "What'd you do that for?!"

"Well, you did ask for it," Abner said with a snicker.

"Abner..." Shantae pouted.

"Sorry," Abner sighed. "If it helps, I didn't think it would hurt you that much."

The door to Nora's room creaked open, making the lobster girl tense up while everyone but Vera turned to face the opening door in confusion. "Nora, is everything okay?" a familiar voice spoke as a green eyeball peaked through the crevice. The eyeball blinked in shock, seeing Vera lying on the bed helplessly. "Vera!" In raced a red blur, with an older woman now appearing by Vera's side. "Vera, what happened?!"

"Nothing," Vera insisted weakly. "I fell..."

"Don't lie to me," Agnes demanded worriedly. "Why are you bleeding?" Her green eyeball stared judgmentally at Nora while her regular eyes remained focused on Vera. "Nora, what happened?"

"Long story," Nora said nervously, tapping her fingers together anxiously. "We sort of brought some friends over to help Vera with an issue."

Agnes turned her head, nearly falling over when she noticed four guests in the room. *Where did they come from?* the older woman wondered. *And what's Shantae doing here?* "What issue?" she asked aloud.

"Mognes..." Vera murmured, making Agnes turn back to her half-Genie daughter. "I just wanted... to help them..." the young half-

Genie mumbled as her eyes closed, letting her exhaustion take control and put her into a deep sleep.

Agnes tensed up briefly before she let out a deep sigh, placing her hand against Vera's forehead. "Just take it easy. The bleeding should stop in a bit," she stated. *Vera... why do you feel the need to help everyone?* she thought miserably. *I know it's the right thing to do, but...*

"Uh hey," Abner interjected. "She's gonna be okay, right?"

Agnes looked up, staring Abner in the eye. "I think so," the older woman murmured. "If you don't mind, who are you people?" she asked, scanning the room. "I've met Rotty and Shantae before, but not you two."

"They're my older brothers," Rotty explained. "Vera wanted to help fix our problems using her and Shantae's magic."

"I'm very sorry about what happened, Madam," Poe said solemnly. "Had I known this would hurt Vera, I would not have agreed to it."

"Me neither," Abner agreed.

Agnes looked over to Rotty and Shantae. "Did either of you know this would happen?" she asked sternly.

"No," Rotty answered while Shantae shook her head.

"Does this always happen when she heals people?" Shantae asked worriedly.

"Yes, but this is a bit worse than before," Agnes sighed. "I've only seen her bleed like this once before. About a year ago, but she never told me why." The angler fish woman locked eyes with Rotty. "Did it have to do with you?"

"How did you know?" Rotty questioned.

"I didn't," Agnes admitted. "But the fact she felt the need to help you did make me wonder."

"It's my fault," Nora spoke up, startling everyone. The lobster girl had been silent the past couple of minutes that she had almost become invisible. "I encouraged Vera to do it. And I promised to keep it from you and Mom because I knew it was gonna hurt Vera."

"Nora..." Agnes murmured, her voice sounding exhausted and disappointed.

"I thought maybe if I could help Vera with her problems, it might help me forget about my own," Nora whimpered.

"What do you mean?" Agnes asked.

"Vera feels bad she turned us into zombies," Rotty interjected with a sigh. "We were dying, and she wanted to save us. Shantae's mom and Aja shared magic with each other's kid, giving Vera wish magic."

"Wish magic?" Agnes questioned.

"It's what helped save Rotty and her brothers," Shantae explained. "But they became zombies without memories and they needed to drink coffee to stay sane."

"Wait, why?" Agnes asked.

"I'm not sure why they turned into zombies," Shantae spoke without confidence.

"No, I mean... why coffee?" Agnes asked, startling Shantae.

"Dunno," Rotty said with a shrug.

"I have yet to understand it myself," Poe joined in.

Agnes turned back to Nora. "What did you mean by your problems? What's wrong, Nora?"

"I keep having nightmares about Dad," Nora whispered. "I wish I could have helped him."

Agnes placed a hand on Nora's shoulder and took a deep breath.

"Nora, it was too late to help him. You can't blame yourself for that."

"I guess..." Nora murmured. "I just thought... maybe I could help the people who are still here, you know?"

Agnes groaned. "Okay, but when Vera wakes up, I don't want her using her magic unless she *needs* to. Do *not* encourage her, got it?"

"But Mognes..."

" *Promise* me," Agnes demanded.

"I promise..." Nora sighed.

"Thank you," Agnes said, letting out a breath of relief. "I have no problems with you kids helping people. But I don't want to see you getting hurt in the process. You two did a good thing, whatever it was. But... not every good deed can be done so haphazardly, got it?"

"Yeah, Mognes," Nora said with a small nod. "Do you want me to take Vera to her room?"

"Yes, then send these four home," Agnes stated, putting her hands underneath Vera's legs. "Give me a hand, will you?"

Nora nodded, helping to pick Vera up from the other side. "We'll be back in a few minutes," the lobster girl said, looking back as she and Agnes carried Vera out of the room.

"This was a mistake," Abner groaned.

"It'll be okay," Rotty murmured, her voice being weighed down by the guilt in her throat. "At least, I think."

"We made that poor mother worry," Abner sighed.

"Maybe we should have only had Rotty receive the magic," Poe suggested. "To lessen the impact. Focusing on the three of us must have been quite the strain."

"Well, she didn't tell us what would happen," Shantae pointed out.

"So none of us could have known." The half-Genie turned to Rotty. "Speaking of which, how's your memory doing?"

"Let's see," Rotty began, rubbing her forehead. Invisible gears began to crank in her cranium as a new thought came to be. "The sum of the square roots of any two sides of an isosceles triangle is equal to the square root of the remaining side," the zombie girl said in a formal manner before she began to giggle. "I remember I learned that somewhere."

"Woah," Shantae said in amazement. "That's better than I could ever remember."

"Should we tell her?" Poe whispered to Abner.

Abner crossed his arms and gave a shrug. "I don't really care."

"So what else do you remember?" Shantae asked before she turned to Abner and Poe. "Do you guys remember anything? Like your past?"

"I can think of one thing for now," Poe said, rubbing his forehead. "I think I remember giving Rotty her first skateboard." The smile on Poe's face grew wider as he craned his neck towards Rotty. "You really enjoyed it."

"I remember that," Rotty said fondly. "I kinda broke it... good thing you fixed it."

"Yes, and then you broke it again," Poe laughed. "What about you, Abner?"

"I think I played football in high school," Abner replied. "It's kinda foggy. Give it some time. What about you, Rotters? Anything else?"

"I think something," Rotty murmured. "Remembering that far back is kinda blurry. But stuff from a few weeks ago is much clearer now. I remember what I ate for lunch the other day. I think it was a burger. I couldn't do that before. I usually forget what I eat."

"Do you remember your parents at all?" Shantae asked.

"I remember... two people," Rotty murmured. "We had a mom. She was sweet, I think. And a dad, who was... not as nice. But, I think... he cared."

"You can actually remember them?" Poe asked.

"Yeah, I think I even remember their names," Rotty said with a smile. "Margaret and Gabriel. My old name, Rosa. It was based on Mom's maiden name, Rose." Another name came into Rotty's head, an unpleasant name she would much rather forget. *That's not me,* she assured herself. *It was never me. I'm Rotty.*

"Do you know what happened to them?" Abner asked, uncrossing his arms.

"I remember... a car crash..." Rotty said somberly, looking down at her feet. "Mom and Dad were in the front seats, and they didn't make it..."

"Rotty... I'm so sorry," Shantae murmured, approaching the zombie girl.

Rotty let out a sigh, rubbing her eyes. "It's in the past."

"Any idea where they're buried?" Abner asked, trying not to let his eyes become moist.

"I think... on this island," Rotty winced, making Abner's eyes widen. "Ab, you were taking us on a plane to visit them..."

Abnr became frozen like a statue. "They were here... the entire time..." he murmured. "I've been to this island before a couple times."

"Do you want to see if we can go find them?" Rotty suggested.

"Not today," Abner sighed. "I need... to process this."

"Ab, it's gonna be okay," Rotty said, walking up to her brother. "They may be gone, but me and Poe are still here. And one day, we're gonna see them again. So it'll be even better."

Abner chuckled slightly. "That's a funny way to look at things," he murmured.

"Life does hold a different value if it's not everlasting," Poe pointed out. "We should make the best of what we have now."

"Poe's right," Rotty agreed. "Gotta enjoy life while we still can, right? And I am gonna make up for lost time! Especially with sleeping and eating."

"You could already eat," Abner pointed out.

"Well yeah, but knowing my body will change from it now is awesome!" Rotty said excitedly. "It can't hurt to gain a little weight. I'm all skin and bones, Ab."

Shantae chuckled. "Pun intended?" she assumed, smiling at the zombie girl.

"Maybe," Rotty said with a sly grin. "I'm really going to enjoy that dinner with you now."

"This is making me hungry too," Poe said nonchalantly. "It's funny. It's a familiar feeling, yet unfamiliar."

The door creaked open as a certain lobster teen walked back into the room. "Hey," Nora said, peeking her head through. "You guys ready to go home now?"

"I think so," Shantae said with a smile. "Holly's probably still asleep, so it's not like she's gonna notice I was gone."

"Who's Holly?" Nora asked, walking into the room.

"New roommate," Shantae stated. "Long story. I'll tell you another time." A new thought swirled into Shantae's mind. *Wait... could Vera and I have helped Holly too? I guess it's too late to tell. I don't really feel the wish magic anymore. Is it gone? Or just drained for now?* The half-Genie became lost in thought as Nora began drawing out a new circle on the floor. *I do feel kinda lightheaded, like something's different. But what?*

"You okay, Shantae?" Rotty asked, snapping the half-Genie out of her thoughts.

"Yeah, I think," Shntae murmured. "Just wondering how that wish magic works."

"Oh right," Nora said loudly, rushing over to her bed. Picking up a giant book, she held it up to Shantae. "You should give this to Harmony."

"Good idea," Shantae agreed, taking the book from Nora's hands. "But wait, doesn't this mean a lot to you? Are you sure you want to give it up?"

"It's not really mine," Nora said with a small smile. "It's Harmony's. And besides... I took photos of literally every page on my phone. I got backups."

"I guess that makes sense," Shantae murmured.

"Let's get going," Abner suggested, rubbing his eyes. "I wanted to see if that place is still available to rent. I'm tired of living in that carriage."

"An actual roof over our heads would be nice," Poe agreed.

"Especially since we can sleep now," Rotty chimed in happily. The zombie continued to smile as she pulled on her elbow, watching her arm detach effortlessly. She then placed it back against her elbow, proudly watching it reattach like a toy. A green aura appeared, connecting her arm back in place like a zipper. Rotty proudly stared over her arm, feeling more comfortable in her skin than she ever had before. *I'm still me.*

Truth be told, I actually forgot about Holly until I got towards the end of writing this chapter. Kinda fitting given her character in the games.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Bolo walked throughout Spider Forest, making his way to a certain shop. It had been a few days since the funeral, and Bolo had already stopped by Shantae's place. *Weird how she knows two immortals now,* Bolo thought to himself. *But Emma's expecting me, and I don't want to keep her waiting.* Then he realized that there was a group of people lined up in the front of his path. *Wait, a line? In the forest?*

The line consisted of people he recognized from Water Town as well as people he had not met before. *Do I need to wait in line?* Bolo asked himself. *I mean, Emma's probably busy with all these customers, so I guess I can wait.* He tried rubbing his chin, thinking of what he could say to Emma once he got to the front of the line.

"Oh, Bolo!" a rock creature spoke, making Bolo look up. Before him stood a golem man that postured himself like a gorilla.

No, not him. Anybody but him!

"Long time no see, buddy!" the rock creature said eagerly, lifting up his stony hand.

Bolo groaned, shaking the creature's hand. "Hi... Steve..."

"I've been meaning to ask you," Steve spoke with an eager face. "My son Flint is looking to play his rock concert in a few days!" The golem let out a hearty laugh, finding his own joke the funniest thing in the world. Meanwhile, Bolo held a grim expression on his face. The young man could not explain why, but it felt like Steve's positive attitude had an inverse effect on his own. "Would you like my spare ticket? I've always viewed you as like a son, Bolo my boy! I think you should have it!"

Bolo let out a groan. "No thanks, sir."

Steve snapped his fingers, breaking off a chunk of his rugged skin in the process. However, this did not seem to phase the golem. "Oh well!" he announced loudly, making everyone ahead of him glance back in confusion. "Guess you just want to break ol' Steve's heart again, don't you?" The line ahead turned their gaze to Bolo, now glaring at the young man.

Why me? Bolo wanted to say. "No, Steve..." he sighed, watching the line's glares go away. "I'll go to the concert with you..."

"Atta boy!" Steve exclaimed, wrapping his arms tightly around Bolo. The grip felt like a chokehold with Bolo gasping for air. "Oh, sorry!" Steve chuckled, loosening his grip and releasing Bolo from the bear hug.

Bolo panted, barely able to breathe. *I REALLY hate that guy...*

"I'm so sorry," the older woman apologized, hanging her head in shame. "He's not here right now." The woman had long blue hair that reached down to her waist, and she wore a yellow t-shirt and jeans. Her green eyes shined like emeralds, mystifying Zapple completely. The woman was stunningly beautiful, making the half-Genie wonder how somebody could fluster her so much.

Focus, the half-Genie told herself, trying to hide her blushing.

"Say, are you a mermaid?" the woman asked. "We don't see those too often around here."

"Yeah, I am," Zapple said quickly, wanting to get the conversation back on track. "Do you know where he is?"

"He went to visit a friend of his," the woman spoke. "If you like, I can get your phone number and give it to him later."

"Maybe you can just tell me where he's headed," Zapple suggested.

"If you want," the woman shrugged. "But my grandson's probably

going to be busy."

"Wait, grandson?" Zapple questioned, her jaw dropping. The woman that stood before her didn't look much older than herself. "I thought you were his sister or something."

"I just age well," the woman chuckled. "I'm Vanessa, by the way."

That's one hot granny, Zapple thought to herself. *Wait, where are his parents?* she wondered.

Vanessa gestured to the cane she was leaning on. "I may not look it, but I need this to get around. Back's been killing me ever since that car accident a decade ago." The older woman let out a yawn, leaning on her cane with a curious look in her eye. "So why the interest in Bolo?"

"I need his help," Zapple sighed. "My mentor Simon says he can help my town back home. You know, teach them self-defense."

The older woman chuckled. "My Bolo," she said warmly. "Growing up so fast. I'm sure he'll be a great teacher. He's entirely self-taught, you know."

Zapple raised an eyebrow. "He is?"

"Yep," Vanessa said with an eager nod. "He watched those old martial arts movies as a kid, copied their moves, and now he's our town's guardian."

Zapple's jaw nearly dropped. "A-are you... serious?" she barely managed to say.

"Well, he watched a few cartoons along the way, but more or less that's what happened," Vanessa replied with a goofy grin. "He's never been good at copying moves he's seen up close though. Not sure why."

Is this backwards town or something? Zapple wanted to say. *First they sell hot coffee in the blistering heat, and now this?! How does Simon expect this guy to teach ANYBODY?!*

"Tell me," Vanessa began, getting up in Zapple's face. The lack of space between them, with Vanessa inches away from Zapple's face, made the half-Genie want to hightail it out of there. "Is this *really* about training some big town or whatever? Or do you just have a thing for my grandson?"

"...What?" was all Zapple could say.

"Bolo's become a bit of a ladies man recently," Vanessa spoke as if she were gossiping. "He told me about this girl named Emma, who seems to like him back. So sorry Missy, but you're a bit too late for that train!"

"I'm not trying to date him!" Zapple snapped, startling the older woman. Zapple took notice of the frightened look on Vanessa's face, making the half-Genie's anger subside. "Look, I'm... sorry. I just need his help. Can you please tell me where he is?"

Vanessa let out a sigh. "I should be the one apologizing," she said, rubbing the back of her neck nervously. "I can usually tell what people are about to ask, so I make assumptions a lot. Sorry about that."

Zapple rubbed her temples. "You know what they say about assuming," she replied.

Zapple walked out of the house, looking over the new contact in her phone. *At least I got his number,* she thought to herself, reading out the number. *Mom's still sleeping at the nearby inn. I can probably go get that Bolo guy before she wakes up. Then we can make plans to have him visit Armor Town.*

As she started walking, something stopped her in her tracks. Or rather, someone. Zapple could hear both herself and another girl shout as their heads collided, knocking them both back a few steps. "Watch where you're going," Zapple groaned before she noticed her phone had been knocked to the ground.

"You're one to talk," the other girl murmured, rubbing her throbbing

head. Zapple bent down to pick up her phone, another phone next to hers. While Zapple's phone case was a plain red color, the other phone case was a combination of blue and pink stripes.

Cute colors, Zapple thought to herself, picking up the colorful phone. She held it up to the blonde girl, who wore an annoyed expression on her face.

Is that a mermaid? Sky questioned, studying Zapple's skin tone. Sky observed the breathing system around Zapple's neck, recognizing the technology. *I've only ever seen a merperson wear that kind of stuff. But I thought mermaids didn't have natural legs.* Sky had met a couple merfolk back when she was a kid, but they had all worn robotic legs around their tails to get around on land. No merfolk actually lived in Sequin Land due to its blistering heat, with most only being tourists. And yet, this girl did not seem that bothered by the heat.

"Hey, sorry about all that," Zapple said reluctantly. "Just haven't been in a good mood lately."

Sky's expression slowly changed, becoming less agitated and more understanding. "Thanks. I guess I can relate," she murmured, a smile now forming on her lips. "I'm Sky."

"Zapple," the mermaid answered.

"What kind of name is that?" Sky questioned, her tone both curious and baffled.

Of course, Zapple wanted to groan. *Why does everyone ask me that? It's not THAT weird.* Instead, she said, "My mom picked it. It's the name of a TV show she watched before I was born." While Zapple did like her name, she hated having to explain it to people.

"Never heard of it," Sky said with a shrug. "So what are you doing outside Bolo's house?"

"I was looking for him," Zapple murmured "This may sound weird, but I need his help."

Sky sighed. "Is this some kind of big adventure?" she asked wearily.

Zapple raised an eyebrow. "Does that happen a lot?"

"Just once, and that's enough for me," Sky groaned. "It seems like ever since a week ago, nothing's been normal for me."

"What do you mean?" Zapple asked.

Sky paused for a moment, considering her options. *Will she actually listen? I guess it can't hurt to try,* she told herself. "I'll tell you on the way," Sky stated. *I'll just tell her bits and pieces. Nothing to stress me out too much.* "Bolo's not here, right? Then he's probably off to Emma's."

"Is that his girlfriend or something?" Zapple questioned.

"I have *no* idea," Sky said with an exhausted sigh. "They're probably in Spider Forest."

"Sounds like a perfect place for spiders," Zapple snarked, making a small chuckle escape from Sky's lips. "So you live around here?"

Sky shook her head as the two began walking. "My apartment's back in Oasis Town. It's two towns back from here."

"Seems like quite a walk," Zapple observed.

"Not really," Sky replied. "Most of the towns in Sequin Land are right next to each other. It should take us less than fifteen minutes to walk there."

Convenient, Zapple thought to herself. "So, you live by yourself?"

"I have been for a year now," Sky stated. "My mom drives me nuts and... my dad's... not with us anymore..." the birdkeeper murmured, looking away from Zapple as they walked.

"I'm sorry," Zapple whispered, trying to maintain eye contact with Sky. The mermaid rubbed her shoulder nervously. "I don't want to say I know how it feels, but... I lost my dog when I was a kid..."

Sky looked back up to face Zapple. "I... appreciate the thought," Sky whispered. "What was the dog's name?"

"Erika," Zapple answered, beginning to smile. "You have any pets?"

"My bird Wrench," Sky stated, a smile forming on her own lips. "He's pretty much my best friend. Got him when I was a kid."

"That must be one old bird," Zapple assumed.

"You'd think so, but his species can live for about a hundred years," Sky stated. "So I'll have some company when I'm old. And he helps me make money with his eggs."

"Wait, so you sell bird eggs?" Zapple questioned.

"There aren't any birds in them," Sky explained. "They're like chicken eggs. Fine to eat. Wrench's eggs probably taste better than any normal egg."

"So that's how you pay the rent," Zapple assumed.

"That's one way," Sky replied. "I got my pilot's license a while back. Figured I could give people rides with the plane they gave. Or maybe join an airline or something. What about you?"

"I live with my parents," Zapple stated. "I mean, I have a job technically. I'm the Town Guardian."

"Fancy," Sky said with a chuckle. "Seems I'm always meeting important people these days."

"Is that right?" Zapple chuckled. *She's actually... kind of nice.*

"I've been meaning to ask," Sky began. "How do you have normal legs? Most mermaids use robot legs."

"Well, it's a bit of a secret," Zapple sighed.

"You don't have to say," Sky pointed out.

"Thanks," Zapple replied. As soon as that statement escaped her lips, a new thought consumed her brain. *Could I tell her? I don't think she'd go around blabbing about me, but I don't know. She has been nice, more than anybody outside of my family. It'd be so nice*

to have somebody to talk to about this... Maybe I could say it's a joke if I get a bad reaction...

"You okay?" Sky asked, snapping Zapple out of her thoughts. "You looked like you were stuck thinking about something."

Eh, what's the worst that could happen? Zapple convinced herself. "I guess I'll tell you."

"You sure?" Sky asked.

"Yeah," Zapple affirmed with a weak nod. "You see, when a merman and a Genie love each other very much..."

"You're a half-Genie?" Sky asked, her jaw dropping.

Zapple took a step back, disturbed by Sky's sudden astonishment. The mermaid studied the blonde girl's expression, finding it to be one of shock and slight terror. She had feared Sky would idolize her, but it almost seemed like the girl was afraid of her. "Wait," Zapple began, pointing an accusatory finger. "How do you know what a half-Genie is?"

Sky let out a deep groan. "Because I know three of them," she said in exasperation, making Zapple's eyes widen up. *Why can't I just meet somebody normal?* Sky wondered to herself. *Why is everybody I've met in the past week so important?*

"There's... more like me?" Zapple asked hesitantly. *Does that mean Harmony's still alive? And who are the other two?*

"Yes..." Sky murmured, stopping in her tracks. "Look, I'm not really a pillar of mental strength. And last week *really* tested what I could handle."

"Look, I'm not here to be a hassle," Zapple stated defensively. "I just want Bolo's help. My mentor thinks he can help train my town to defend themselves. That's it."

Sky let out a deep breath. "Do you promise?"

"Yes," Zapple stated. "I don't know what's happened to you, but I'm

not going to add to your problems."

"I hope you're right," Sky sighed. "I guess I have my own secrets too."

"You wanna talk about it?" Zapple suggested. "You've been helping me destress. Maybe I can return the favor."

"I... guess... talking could help," Sky admitted, noticing a nearby tree log on the ground. She bent her knees to sit down on the log, taking a deep breath while observing that Zapple was still standing. "You could... sit too if you want," Sky offered. "It's a big log."

"I wasn't sure," Zapple stated, sitting down at the other edge of the log. "You seemed like you needed some personal space."

"Well, I can't hold my neck up forever," Sky chuckled, making Zapple snort in response.

"Yeah, that would be kinda annoying," Zapple agreed. "So just start from the beginning."

"If you insist," Sky said, a smile appearing on her face. For some inexplicable reason, her stress felt much lighter than before. "It all started... when I was born," she joked, making her wonder how long ago it had been since she had intentionally made a joke.

"Guess we're gonna be here a while," Zapple snorted. "I knew I should have picked psychology as my major."

"There's not a shrink in the world who could handle me," Sky laughed.

"Maybe I should have brought some popcorn then," Zapple giggled.

This is actually... helping, Sky thought to herself. *Is this a dream?* "Do you want the long version or the short version?"

"Whatever works for you," Zapple replied.

"Okay," Sky stated. "Hey, don't you need to go talk to Bolo?"

"He can wait," Zapple replied. "So what's bugging you the most?"

"Better question is what isn't?" Sky said with a small chuckle, laying her head back against the log. "I guess as a kid, my mom was my biggest problem. Always treating me like a baby, even now. And my dad died when I was a kid... so my mom tried getting me a new one."

"A new one?" Zapple questioned.

"Yeah, she dates constantly," Sky sighed. "Even before the funeral, she went on a date with some guy from a coffee shop. I didn't want a new dad, and none of her boyfriends really cared about me. There were a few that did, but Mom usually got dumped within a month or even sooner."

"No wonder you live by yourself," Zapple observed with a wince.

"There was one guy I wish had been my father," Sky stated. "A guy named Mimic, who raised Shantae. She's one of the half-Genies I know."

"And how did you meet her?" Zapple asked.

"Some bullies were yanking on her ears, trying to force her to do magic," Sky explained, sitting back up. "They called her useless because she didn't seem to have any."

Zapple looked over her hands, staring at the palms. So long ago they were brimming with energy, but now they were as common as any other hands. "Did she... ever figure out how to do magic?"

"Just last week," Sky stated. "At the time, Bolo and I came to help her. I yelled up a storm at them and Bolo kicked one kid in the face. It scared them off. After that, Bolo taught Shantae and I how to fight."

"So did he actually learn how to fight from watching movies?" Zapple asked.

Sky rubbed her head with an awkward chuckle. "I guess so," she said, making Zapple's eyes widen in shock. "Yeah, I don't get it

either. But he is a great teacher. I'm a decent fighter because of him."

"If you say so," Zapple sighed. "So what happened next?"

"Well, I moved out of my mom's house last year," Sky stated. "It's nice, but kinda lonely, even with Wrench. Not that I want to go back, but it would be nice to have a roommate."

"It would make paying the rent easier," Zapple agreed.

Sky nodded. "Wrench doesn't always lay eggs, so I sometimes have him fly tourists around for some extra gems."

"Wait, how do you do that?" Zapple questioned. "How big is your bird?"

"Normally, he's pretty small," Sky began. "But I found out a while back he can grow in size. He can turn into a giant and fly a few people on his back."

"How does nobody fall off?"

"I fly with Wrench," Sky stated. "I'm there to keep the passenger from falling off, so I have them sit ahead of me. One passenger at a time to keep things safe."

"I'm guessing you don't get a lot of tourists," Zapple assumed. "Otherwise you wouldn't be worrying about rent."

"It depends on the month," Sky replied. "But I always keep my eye out for tourists. I have some money saved over so I can finally take a vacation."

"Sounds like you need one," Zapple observed. "So what happened last week?"

"That's a long one," Sky murmured, letting out a sigh. "Mimic had asked me to look after some magic key that was supposed to hold back some kind of demon. There were four in total, made from the magic of Shantae's mother, Ana."

"Wait, Ana is her mother?" Zapple questioned.

"You knew her?" Sky asked.

"I knew *of* her," Zapple stated. "She brought a dark magic crystal to Earth for some reason and it led to so much trouble..."

"Was it the Pirate Master?" Sky questioned hesitantly.

"Yes," Zapple murmured. "I'm guessing you know about the dark magic infections?"

Sky nodded. "And the prisoners too."

"That's the weirdest part," Zapple whispered. "We still don't know what happened to the guy in charge of the prisoners. He scrubbed all of the records and got away while everyone was dealing with the aftermath. I think he was called the Techno Baron." Zapple angrily gripped the shins of her pants. "The treatment they suffered... all because nobody bothered to keep an eye on that guy..."

"Couldn't somebody search for him with their magic?" Sky suggested. "I know Pirate Master stole a lot of magic, but there must have been somebody left who could have tracked this guy."

"There was a magic tracker Genie, but she was killed by the Pirate Master," Zapple explained. "After all that happened, the Genies started going to other planets. Without the Magic Pyramid, they can't make anymore Genies. So half-Genies are the best they can do. I was born before that happened."

Sky became reticent for a moment, wondering if it had been a blessing she had fallen unconscious before the final battle. She had never met the Pirate Master, but the thought of him unsettled her more and more. The idea that he could render beings of such magnitude powerless was mind-boggling. Looking over to Zapple, Sky noticed the mermaid's normal legs once more. "What happened to your parents?" the birdkeeper asked. "Are they still around?"

"Both are," Zapple spoke with a weak smile. "Although my dad's usually busy with work."

"So there's still a Genie on Earth?" Sky questioned.

"Yeah, but the Pirate Master stole her magic," Zapple explained. "She can't make a portal to get home, and the Genies haven't bothered to keep in contact since she lost her magic."

"What is the deal with the Genies?" Sky asked. "They're supposed to be guardians, but they don't sound very heroic."

"I wish I knew," Zapple sighed. "My mom still regrets that she didn't believe what Serena had told her about the prisons."

"Serena? Harmony's mom?"

Zapple nodded optimistically. *Maybe...* she thought to herself. "Is Harmony friends with you?"

"She's friends with Shantae," Sky said, making Zapple sigh a breath of relief.

"Is she doing okay?"

"Not the best," Sky admitted. "This is going to sound crazy, but the Pirate Master put her in a dream world. Most of her life was a fantasy."

"He could do that?" Zapple asked, terror filling her voice.

"Somehow, yeah," Sky stated. "She's still getting used to reality."

And I thought he was evil before, Zapple said to herself. "Wait, so who's the last half-Genie?"

"A girl named Vera," Sky explained. "She's being raised by good people, so I think she'll be fine."

"I'm guessing the Pirate Master managed to come back," Zapple assumed.

Sky nodded weakly. "We stopped him, but... Mimic died saving Shantae," she murmured, looking away from Zapple for a moment. The mermaid became reticent, struggling to find the words to

comfort the blonde girl. "We had the funeral a few days ago."

"I'm... sorry," Zapple murmured, placing a hand on Sky's shoulder.

The birdkeeper took notice of this, but Sky was more amazed at her own reaction. Or, lack thereof. Just the other day, Rotty touching Sky had made her tense up. *Am I... getting better?* she wondered as her eyes made contact with Zapple's. "T-thank you." *Should I tell her about the stuff with my mom recently? Maybe another time...*

"I wish I could say something helpful," Zapple admitted awkwardly. "But I can't think of anything."

Sky chuckled. "You listening is more than enough. You're probably a better therapist than any of the ones I've been to."

"I'll be sure to send you my bill," Zapple snarked, making Sky laugh.

"No discounts for a friend?" Sky joked.

"That wouldn't be very professional, would it?" Zapple replied, laughing even more than Sky was.

"No, it wouldn't be," Sky agreed, standing up. "You wanna keep moving?"

Zapple nodded, slowly getting up. She took a deep breath as she did so, looking down at her noticeable gut. *Need to work on that,* she thought irritably.

"You okay?" Sky asked.

Zapple nodded, faking a smile. "Never better."

Bolo had finally made it to the front door of Emma's home, watching Steve walk out with a smile and a bag in his hand. Against his better judgement, Bolo had let Steve cut ahead of him in the line. "Hey a lovely day, Bolo buddy!" Steve announced, leaving cheerfully.

"Bolo?!" A pink blur shouted, suddenly squeezing the life out of the

blue-haired young man. "It's so good to see you!"

"Can't... breathe..." Bolo gasped, feeling Emma crush his spine.

"Sorry!" Emma shouted, releasing Bolo from her bear hug. "Sooooo... how ya been?"

"So-so," Bolo shrugged, slowly regaining his voice. "Why'd you invite me here? You didn't say why over text."

"Well, I wanted to ask you something," Emma said, twirling her thumbs nervously. "Wanna come in? That's not what I wanted to ask, by the way."

"Sure," Bolo replied, nodding slightly while following her inside the house. Inside he noticed Wobble Bell sleeping on a miniature bed. Next to the dog was a normal sized bed, already set up with covers and sheets. "Did you always have a bed here?"

"Just got it yesterday!" Emma said excitedly. "Ever since Harmony became my first customer, I've been having customers show up left and right. She's like a good luck charm."

"So what did you want to ask me?" Bolo asked.

"I've been thinking about moving," Emma began, making Bolo tense up.

Moving? Bolo repeated to himself. *But...*

"I wanted your advice," Emma continued. "A customer suggested I'd move to a certain town where it'd be easier for people to find my place, but I wanted to get your opinion. Do you think I should do it, so I can follow my heart's dream?"

Bolo bit his lip, unsure of how to respond. He locked eyes with Emma, who looked as hopeful as ever. *Would I ever see her again?* he asked himself. *I barely know her though.* Bolo looked away for a moment, staring down at his feet. *I... this... isn't about me. I... should tell her what she needs to hear.* Bolo opened his mouth, letting out his advice. "I-I think you should do it. Just... make sure you have a plan first."

"Great!" Emma exclaimed, wrapping her arms around Bolo. "I knew I could count on your advice."

Bolo slowly returned the hug, letting out a deep sigh. *Will I ever meet somebody like her again? Somebody as nice as her?* he wondered. "I'm gonna miss you, Emma."

"Miss me?" Emma asked, pulling away with a chuckle. "I'm moving to Water Town."

"Wait, you are?" Bolo asked, his jaw dropping.

"Yeah, I figured you'd appreciate that," Emma giggled. "I mean, you live there, right?"

"How'd you know that?" Bolo asked.

"Harmony told me," Emma explained. "Well, after Shantae told Harmony. She gave Harmony your number as a backup contact, and told her where you live. Long story short, Harmony was visiting one day and I asked her for advice too. She mentioned you live in Water Town, so that kinda gave me incentive to do it."

"But what if it was another town far away?" Bolo asked, scratching his head. "Would you still have gone if I didn't live there?"

"Probably," Emma admitted sheepishly. "Look, I do like you a lot, but I do have my own life too, you know?"

Bolo nodded slowly. "Wait, but why ask me if you should follow your dream?"

"Well... I'm looking for a guy who won't shackle me down to keep himself happy," Emma explained. "I wanted to see the type of man you are."

"And... what type am I?" Bolo questioned.

"A good one," Emma answered with a bright smile, walking up to Bolo. Standing up on her tippy toes, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek. The young man nearly collapsed from the shock, his face completely crimson. "Thank you. It means a lot." She noticed Bolo

had become frozen as a statue, completely lost in a mixture of bewilderment and bliss. "Uh... Earth to Bolo? I didn't kill you, right?"

Bolo's head spun back and forth, quickly snapping himself back to his senses. "No, I'm alive... I think."

"Okay, good," Emma chuckled. "Don't need that on my conscience!"

"So, are you gonna need help moving?" Bolo asked, rubbing his elbow nervously. "I can help, if you want."

"Sure, that'd be great," Emma said eagerly. Letting out a small chuckle, the chef girl rubbed her chin as a new thought was forming. "That green girl, Rottytops. She said I was your girlfriend, right?"

"I guess so," Bolo murmured, blushing once more.

"Maybe one day she'll be right," Emma giggled. "Have you ever been on a date before?"

"Uh... no..." Bolo muttered, his heart racing. "Are you... asking me out?"

"Well, yeah," Emma laughed. "Would you like to?"

"Y-yeah," Bolo stammered. "I would."

"Great!" Emma announced. "I'd say we could go out to a restaurant, but that's probably a bit cliché."

Bolo let out a chuckle, replying, "I'm not much of a cook. That's something my granny is better at."

"Maybe I could meet her sometime," Emma suggested. "Oooh, I know. How about a movie? I think there's a theatre a couple towns over."

"I mean, I have some old shows and movies on DVD," Bolo offered. "Kill two birds with one stone. Meet my granny, and watch a movie."

"Sounds great," Emma said excitedly.

"H-have you... ever dated before?" Bolo asked.

"Nope," Emma replied, still smiling.

"Then why are you so confident about it?" Bolo questioned.

"I guess I just know what I want," Emma said with a shrug. "By the way, you wanna work for my restaurant in Water Town?"

"Sounds like a bad idea to date your boss," Bolo chuckled.

"Oh yeah, good point," Emma said, patting her head.

A knock could be heard from the front door, making both Emma and Bolo look back. "Were you expecting anyone?" Bolo asked.

"No, just you," Emma admitted, walking over to open the door. The opened door had revealed two young women, one of whom Emma and Bolo recognized. "Oh it's you, Avery."

"Sky," the blonde woman groaned. "How do you know my mom's name?"

"I didn't," Emma chuckled nervously. "Guess you just look like an Avery."

Sky grumbled, rubbing her temples profusely while noticing Bolo walking up to the side of Emma. "Are you Bolo?" Zapple asked, looking over to the blue-haired man.

"Yeah, who's asking?" Bolo asked.

Wait, why didn't Bolo have a reaction to Zapple? Sky wondered, turning her head to Emma. *Is that chef girl straightening him out?*

"I'm Zapple," the mermaid introduced herself. "I kinda need your help. Have you ever taught self-defense before?"

"A couple times," Bolo admitted with a shrug. "Why, do you need lessons?"

"I can help too," Emma offered. "I've had a lot of training over the

years."

Since how does she know how to fight? Sky wondered to herself.

"Whoever can help," Zapple replied before she turned to Bolo. "My mentor thinks you'd be a great teacher to my town, so they can rely on themselves instead of me."

"Are you a Town Guardian too?" Bolo asked.

"Yes," Zapple answered. "I'm a half-Genie, like Harmony and the others."

"Really?" Bolo asked in surprise. "That means four half-Genies. That's gotta be like..."

"Two full genies?" Emma guessed.

"Something like that," Bolo agreed.

"I... what?" Zapple questioned. *I hope this stupidity isn't contagious.*

"Wait, how do you know Harmony?" Emma questioned.

"Sky filled me in on the details," Zapple explained. "So, would either of you be willing to help me and my town out?"

"Of course," Bolo said with an eager nod. "If people need some help, I don't see why not." The blue-haired young man turned to Sky briefly. "And Sky, maybe you can finally get a vacation this way. You were always talking about saving up for one, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Sky agreed reluctantly. While she had wanted a vacation, she had wanted to get away from the weirdness for a change. She had appreciated Zapple's company, but the half-Genie's very presence was a constant reminder of the abnormal life Sky had been trapped in the past couple of weeks. *But... I should probably go,* Sky told herself. *Just to keep an eye on Bolo, so he doesn't get hurt or anything.*

"Guess that puts our date on hold," Bolo said with an awkward smile, turning to Emma.

Sky's eyes widened in surprise. *Excuse me?*

So they are dating, Zapple assumed.

"No problem," Emma said with a shrug. "I can go with you guys and we can have our date there."

This was weirder than almost anything Sky had seen recently. "Your what?"

Fun Fact(s):

1. I decided to make Bolo's granny (who I named Vanessa) an attractive woman based off an old official Shantae Twitter account (Shantae_WF) that retells the original GBC game through Shantae's perspective. Through that account, Shantae calls Vanessa "Bolo's attractive granny."

2. Vanessa's green eyes are a reference to the original GBC game, where Bolo mentions she has eyes like shining emeralds. Although in my story, it's never suggested Bolo is attracted to his own grandmother.

Fan Cast:

Vanessa - Jennifer Hale (Black Cat; Spider-Man 1994)

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"Run that by me again," Sky demanded. "Your what?"

"Our date," Emma repeated, as if the answer was not obvious.

"You two barely know each other," Sky said in exasperation. While she could see a chemistry between the two, Bolo and Emma had known each for a week at most.

"Yeah, I can't believe it myself," Bolo admitted with a chuckle.

"He's a pretty lucky guy," Emma giggled, playfully elbowing Bolo in the side. "Sometimes things just work well together, you know. Like mac and cheese."

"Or steak and ketchup," Bolo agreed.

"That's also good," Emma said with a nod.

I really *need that vacation,* Sky thought miserably. *If Bolo can find love, why can't I?*

"If you're done being jealous..." Zapple interjected.

"I'm not jealous," Sky groaned, rubbing her temples.

"Sky, I get it," Bolo replied with an understanding smile. "You're just trying to look out for me."

"Thank you," Sky sighed, feeling a moment of relief.

"As I was saying, I wanna talk to Harmony," Zapple continued. "I figure she'd like to meet my mom."

"Your mom's alive?" Bolo asked in surprise. "Wait, why didn't she help us out with the Pirate Master?"

"Well, she doesn't have magic anymore," Zapple replied.

"Then why didn't *you* help out?" Emma questioned.

"Because I was on another island," Zapple groaned, looking away. She looked down briefly before she pulled her head back up, having felt repulsed by her stout figure. Rubbing her shoulders anxiously, the mermaid spoke quietly, "And I didn't know that monster came back until I met Sky today."

Sky placed a hand on Zapple's shoulder, slowly making the mermaid feel a bit warmer. Zapple let go of her shoulders, letting out a deep breath. "We should probably call Shantae, and have her meet you," Sky suggested to Zapple.

"Same goes for Harmony," Emma chimed in.

"And Vera," Sky pointed out as she turned to Zapple. "Might as well tell everyone at once, right?"

"Isn't Vera on another island?" Bolo pointed out. "It'd be hard to just get her to come here on the spot."

"We can probably just call her about it later," Sky suggested. "Rotty has her number, I think."

Bolo raised an eyebrow. *Are her and Rotty friends now?* the young man wondered, questioning the sense of familiarity in the birdkeeper's voice.

"Who's Rotty?" Zapple questioned.

"She's... a... zombie," Sky said hesitantly, although the concern in her voice was more for Zapple than herself.

"Oh, that's what she is," Emma murmured.

"Zombies are real?" Zapple questioned, nearly making Sky fall over.

"What do you mean?" Sky questioned. "Of course they're real!"

"I just thought they were an urban legend," Zapple shrugged. "Does she eat brains or something?"

"Not when she's got coffee," Sky said with a small chuckle.

"Come again?" Zapple questioned.

"That makes sense," Emma stated. "A cup of joe will do anyone good."

Sky wanted to sigh, but she held herself back. Everything the chef girl said was exhausting. Instead, the birdkeeper pulled out her phone. "I'll call Shantae."

"How could you forget me?!" Holly snapped, standing up from the wooden chair at the kitchen table.

"Holly, I didn't mean to," Shantae insisted.

"My chance to kiss immortality goodbye and it never occurred to you to include me?!" Holly roared, her eyes twitching uncontrollably.

Why did Rotty have to let that slip? Shantae wondered, facepalming herself. *Just wanted a day to relax with Rotty. Of course Holly had to be up for a change...*

"It's not like it was on purpose," Rotty sighed, trying not to look Holly in the eye. "Maybe the wish magic will recharge and we can use it on you next."

"I doubt it. I'm never that lucky," Holly groaned, turning to the half-Genie with a look of disappointment and exhaustion. "Do you even know how that wish magic works?"

"Not really," Shantae said squeamishly. "Holly, if I can, I will help you. I promise."

"Forget it," Holly sighed, sitting back down and staring at her bowl of

cereal. "I'll get over it."

A buzzing sound came from Shantae's pocket, making the half-Genie look at the name of the caller. "It's Sky," she said with a faint smile.

"Oh hey, you remembered to charge it," Rotty observed.

They're forgetting about me already, Holly thought miserably.

Shantae answered the phone and pressed a button to put in on speaker. "Hey, Sky. I put the speaker on. Rotty's here too."

"Great, that saves time," Sky spoke with a sigh of relief. "So... there's another half-Genie."

"Wait, what?" Shantae asked in shock.

"I'm not surprised," Holly murmured to herself. *More headaches for me.*

"That's like four now, right?" Rotty guessed.

"Can you give me that?" an unfamiliar voice spoke over the phone.

"Sure, one sec," Sky could be heard saying.

"Thanks," the unfamiliar voice spoke again. "Look, I'm sure you got a lot of questions."

"Yeah..." Shantae murmured. "First would be your name."

"Zapple," the mermaid spoke, some discomfort in her voice.

"Zapple?" Shantae repeated, trying to contain her laughter. "Is that actually your name?"

"Yes, it is," Zapple spoke through gritted teeth. "Like Shanty's any better."

"It's Shantae," the purple-haired half-Genie said, still trying not to giggle. "Sorry, it's just... kinda funny."

"You're just like her," Zapple groaned, the anger in her voice rising a bit.

"Who?" Shantae questioned, already guessing who Zapple was referring to.

"Never mind," Zapple sighed. "Look, I was already filled in about Harmony and Vera. You wanna know more about the Genies? My mom can tell you about them."

"Your mom's alive?" Shantae asked in shock.

"Yes," Zapple sighed once more. "Look, just come to the inn back in Water Town. I'll get one of your friends to call Harmony. I don't feel like repeating this anymore than I have to."

The phone immediately hung up, startling Shantae. "She seems kinda grumpy," the purple-haired girl murmured, putting her phone back in her pocket.

"Probably because you laughed at her name," Holly pointed out, lifting her head up.

"Maybe..." Shantae whispered shyly, rubbing her elbows anxiously.

"What did she mean by saying 'You're just like her?'" Rotty questioned.

"Probably my mom," Shantae sighed.

"That makes sense," Holly chimed in.

"Really don't need the sass, memory girl," Rotty replied, crossing her arms. "Shantae's got enough issues, she doesn't need you chipping away at her self-esteem too."

"Sorry," Holly groaned. "But try living in my shoes. You two can at least live normal lives. Without Shantae, I literally can't be around people that long without hurting them. And with Shantae, I'm stuck taking some stupid drug just to avoid a constant migraine."

"Holly, I'll try to help you, I promise," Shantae insisted. "But please

give me time."

"Time's the one thing I've got," Holly groaned, sinking back down in the chair.

"I guess we should get going," Rotty suggested.

"Good idea," Shantae said before turning her head. "Holly, you coming with us?"

"I guess I have nothing better to do," Holly murmured, standing up. "And besides, I can't really talk to anyone if you're not around."

"You okay?" Sky asked, taking a step closer to Zapple.

"I will be," Zapple sighed, still hearing Shantae's giggles echo in her head. A new thought entered her brain, thinking back to how she had thought Bolo's name sounded asinine. *I didn't say it directly to his face though,* she justified herself.

"Who did you mean by 'her?'" Sky questioned.

"Shantae's mother, Ana," Zapple stated. "From what my mom told me, Ana rarely took things seriously, and her regard for others was dangerously lacking. It was like I was talking to a mini-Ana."

"Shantae's not like that," Bolo chimed in. "She's serious when she needs to be, and she's always worried about what others think about her."

"A little TMI, Bolo," Sky sighed. "But he is right. Shantae's not like her mother."

"I hope not," Zapple murmured, walking towards the front door. "One of you call Harmony. I'll meet you all back at the inn in Water Town. That's where my mom is."

"Do you want something to eat first?" Emma asked, stopping Zapple in her tracks. "I made some cookies earlier this morning."

Zapple opened her mouth, almost saying yes without hesitation. Before she could, she felt a crushing weight pulling herself down. The mermaid bit her lip, reluctant now to give an affirmation. "You got anything healthy?" she asked instead.

"I got some apples," Emma said with a smile, walking near her pantry. "They'll be great for you, Zapple!"

"Not funny," Zapple sighed, watching Emma pull out some apples and place them in a plastic bag.

"What isn't?" Emma questioned, hovering the bag towards Zapple.

"Why are you like this?" Zapple asked angrily, looking at both Emma and Bolo. "Both of you."

"What do you mean?" Bolo questioned.

"Neither of you are exactly playing with a full deck," Zapple groaned.

"I don't know, that's just how I am," Emma said with a playful shrug. "I mean, it just takes me a bit to understand stuff sometimes."

"Yeah, just give us some time," Bolo added. "We'll get it."

"Okay," Zapple murmured, crossing her arms. She felt somebody place their hand on her shoulder, making her notice Sky in the corner of her eye.

"They mean well," Sky stated. "But having a bit of patience can help."

A small chuckle popped out of Zapple. "I could use some of that," she murmured, taking the bag from Emma. "Thanks," she spoke, walking towards the front door. "I'll see you guys at the inn. Try not to keep me waiting."

Why was she so vague? Harmony wondered, reading over her texts from Emma. *Is this some kind of surprise party for me? It's not like my birthday is anytime soon... I think.*

Stepping into Water Town, Harmony looked back and forth to study her surroundings. It was evening now, so the dark skies were illuminated by porch lights. Looking above that, Harmony smiled upon seeing a blanket of stars lighting up the sky along with a full moon. A cool breeze drifted past Harmony's neck, giving her a pleasant shiver. She had spent most of her time inside her grandmother's home, with this truly being the first time she had left the forest since Mimic's funeral.

She slowly made her way to the inn, seeing only one shop was open. As she walked in, she found an older man standing behind a desk. "Ah, a new customer!" he greeted excitedly. "I don't recognize you. Are you a tourist by chance?"

"Not exactly," Harmony said with an awkward smile. "Just felt like making a stop before I get where I need to be."

"Well, in the meantime, why not sample our wares?" the man offered. "We have plenty of wonderful things for a journey. Like potions!"

"What do potions do?" Harmony asked.

"Drink a vial, and they can heal virtually any wound or sickness," the man answered. "Well, as long as it's not *too* severe. It won't cure anything terminal or stuff like that."

"So it's magic?" Harmony questioned. "I thought only Genies could do magic."

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," the man said with a devious grin. "I wouldn't be a very good businessman if I gave away secrets."

I guess he has a point, Harmony concurred to herself, picking up a vial. *But what's in it? Is this stuff even real?*

"You're in luck," the man continued. "We're having a sale. Sixty gems for two of them! Normally they'd be much more on their own!"

Sixty gems? Harmony questioned, studying the vial's contents. *How much is that worth? The dream world had gems, but their value's probably changed over time. And I never really had to focus on*

paying the bills. Harmony let out a small, deflated sigh. *Mom and Dad took care of that stuff. They always told me not to worry...*

"So, what do you say?" the man eagerly.

"Can I get... a free sample first?" Harmony questioned. "You know, to test it."

"I wouldn't be in business if I gave stuff away," the man said with a half-hearted shrug. "But I can assure you, this is the real deal. Our Town Guardian buys from me all the time!"

That's not exactly a vote of confidence, Harmony thought to herself, backing her way towards the door. "I... think I'm gonna go somewhere else... and I think I left my wallet at home anyway..."

"No money? Didn't you read the sign?" the man asked irritably. "No money, no honey! Get out!"

Harmony raised an eyebrow, noticing a sign to the left of her that repeated the same mantra. *How was I supposed to see that?* Harmony questioned. *It's literally inside his store.* Taking a deep breath, the half-Genie replied, "You should probably put that sign outside."

"And you should put *yourself* outside," the man barked, making Harmony groan while leaving.

Is this what Bolo has to deal with? Harmony groaned. *Poor guy.* Finally making her way to the inn, she slowly opened the front door. Inside she saw a bored receptionist struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Are you... here... to make... a... reservation?" The white-haired young woman behind the desk asked groggily, yawning incessantly.

"No, somebody invited me," Harmony explained. "Bolo was looking for me."

"Oh... he's in... room six..." the woman murmured, rubbing her eyes. "Over... left. Door's... open..."

"Thank you," Harmony stated, heading to the hallway on her left. However, she stopped for a moment to look back. "Do you need some help? Like coffee or something?"

"In this... heat?" the woman yawned. "Nooooo..."

"Will you be okay?" Harmony asked.

"Yessss..." the woman, slowly lowering her head against the desk.

Harmony blinked in disbelief. *Is she sleeping standing up?* she questioned. She went over to shake the woman awake, but all she got were loud snores. *This town is weird,* Harmony thought before hearing footsteps behind her. She looked over her shoulder, seeing Shantae, Rotty, and a third orange-haired girl standing behind them.

"Shantae?" Harmony asked. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Shantae said with a smile. "It's good to see you. How have you been holding up?"

"Still figuring things out," Harmony said, rubbing her elbow anxiously. She took notice of Rotty standing next to Shantae, sensing there was something different about the zombie. "Did you change your hair?"

"I grew it out," Rotty giggled, combing her fingers through her curly locks.

"It looks good," Harmony stated.

"Is she sleeping standing up?" Holly questioned, looking over to the receptionist.

"I envy her," Rotty said, her eyes turning starry.

Harmony locked eyes with the orange-haired woman behind Shantae and Rotty. "So who are you? Are you friends with Shantae?"

"Roommates," Holly stated. "It's a long story I don't feel like getting into. But you can call me Holly."

"Holly?" Harmony repeated, feeling a vague familiarity with the name.

"Yes, Holly Lingerbean."

"Wait... I know you," Harmony said, her jaw nearly dropping.

"You do?" Holly asked, pointing a finger towards herself.

"You're the one who fought my mom in that death match," Harmony stated. "But you weren't killing anyone."

"Did your mom tell you about me or something?" Holly questioned.

"Not exactly," Harmony shuddered. "Somebody told me about how my parents met, and you were in the story."

"I'm surprised anybody could remember me that long," Holly admitted. "Who was this person?"

"Like you said," Harmony sighed. "Long story that I don't want to get into." A new thought snapped into Harmony's head. "Wait, a minute. If that story I was told was before I was even born, why do you look so young?"

"An immortal curse," Holly said nonchalantly. "Can't age or die, no matter how hard I try. That's why I was in that death match."

"Are you serious?" Harmony questioned. "Is that magic?"

"I don't know, it just happened one day," Holly said with a shrug.

"Do you... need a hug?" Harmony asked with concern. "Wait, maybe Vera can help you. She has healing magic that might fix your problem."

This last sentence made Holly send an icy glare in Shantae's direction, making the younger half-Genie tense up. *Why is it that Red over here can think of that but you can't?* Holly had wanted to say, but bit her tongue to not provoke the zombie girl's wrath. While she did not care if Rotty attacked her physically, having the zombie rag on her verbally would be far more of a headache. "Let's just

focus on the matter at hand," Holly insisted. "We're all here to visit somebody."

"Who is it?" Harmony asked. "I mean, besides Emma."

"You'll meet her in a minute," Holly sighed. "Let's save the drama for when we get there."

What does she mean by that? Harmony wondered. *I guess I'm about to find out. I just hope it's not too crazy.* Heading down the hallway, the trio followed behind Harmony. *Let's see. Room four, room five.* Harmony saw the next room had its door already open, making her peer her head into the room, where she saw various familiar faces: Emma, Bolo, and Sky. But she also saw two figures she did not recognize: a mermaid girl that looked slightly younger than Harmony, and a much older woman with spiky white hair.

"Hey, you made it!" Emma said excitedly, lifting her arms into the air cheerfully.

"Finally," the mermaid girl sighed, her arms crossed with an exhausted look on her face.

"Do I... know you?" Harmony questioned, looking at the fish girl. *What is she?* Harmony wondered, questioning the mermaid's appearance. *She looks human, but also like a fish.*

"No, but I know you," the mermaid replied. "Well, I know of you. Long story. I'm Zapple."

Is she half-mermaid? Shantae questioned. *I thought Genies only had kids with humans.* She had met a few mermaids over the years, but never one with normal legs. The ones she had met either wore prosthetics on land or none at all.

"And I'm Barbara," the older woman spoke up, walking closer to Harmony. "This may be hard to believe, but... I... am a Genie."

Harmony's entire world became blank, thoughts swirling back to her mother, Ana, and all the other Genies she had seen in Jack's visions. She could still remember the screams of Genies being slashed to ribbons, a memory she had desperately tried to block out.

Barbara almost felt like a ghost, down to the pale white hair she had. "Am I... dreaming?" she asked, feeling her body become wobbly.

"No, this is reality," Shantae spoke up, her voice filled with concern. "Harmony, this isn't a trick or anything."

Harmony turned to face Zapple, almost hesitant to look the mermaid in the eyes. While she had not seen it at first, she noticed a resemblance between Zapple and Barbara's faces. "Are you... a half-Genie too?" she asked the mermaid.

"Yes," Zapple answered, uncrossing her arms. "Look, I know this is a lot to take in, but..."

"No," Harmony stated sternly, stepping back. "This isn't real. It can't be." She grabbed onto her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. *Did Shantae know? This has to be another trick.* She shut her eyes, wanting to escape into the void. "Why... why can't you just leave me alone?" she pleaded, slowly retreating to the floor in a fetal position. "What did I do to deserve this? Why can't you let me be happy...?"

"Harmony..." Emma whispered, bending down to approach her friend. "This isn't Jack. He's not here anymore, I promise. The only people here are your friends."

"And people who care about you," Rotty added, walking over to Harmony. "I know most of us don't know you very well, but we don't want to see you in pain."

"Yeah, none of us," Bolo agreed.

"We're here for you," Sky stated, bending down to hold out her hand.

"Like Vera said," Shantae said, coming closer to the redhead. "We're a family now."

Harmony rubbed her moist eyes and let out a deep sigh. *Why can't I wake up from this nightmare?* she asked herself, slowly pulling herself up. A picture of Jack's bony skull flashed before her eyes, making her shiver with fear. She waited to hear Jack's voice again, with its tone as unnerving as it was soothing, but that expectation was but a dream. "I'm sorry," the redhead whispered.

"It's not your fault," Sky stated.

"I'm so sorry for what he did to you," Barbara spoke, making Harmony tense up. "Sky and the others already told us about the dream world. I wish I could have done something to help you."

"You should be glad he didn't know about you," Harmony murmured, rubbing her shoulders anxiously. "But still... why visit me now? How did you find out about me?"

"That is a funny little thing called coincidence," Zapple interjected.

"Given what I've been through, I doubt it," Shantae murmured.

"Well, whatever you want to call it," Zapple said with a shrug. "But now that we're all here, no need to repeat ourselves."

"It feels crazy to meet another half-Genie," Shantae stated.

"I mean, does it?" Holly asked. "You meet them on the regular, it seems."

"When did she get here?" Zapple questioned, looking over her shoulder.

"Oh, come on, I'm not taking your memories," Holly snapped. "Shantae's here, for crying out loud. And I can feel your magic and Harmony's, so I know Shantae's not the only one who creates a barrier for me."

"Taking memories?" Barbara questioned. "Do you have magic?"

"Never mind," Holly groaned, storming out of the room. "I need to clear my head."

"What's her deal?" Zapple questioned.

"Long story," Shantae sighed. "She's my new roommate."

"Real ray of sunshine there," Zapple snarked.

Harmony rubbed her temples, still baffled by everything going on.

"So, can we just start from the beginning?"

"What would you like to know?" Barbara asked.

"The purpose of the Genies," Harmony answered. "Their history, everything important I should know."

"The history is a bit complex," Barbara began. "We don't know how it came into existence, but a magic pyramid created the first Genie, Vixtra, out of nothing. Slowly, more Genies started popping out."

"And you're all born as adult women," Harmony stated. "Who can't age."

"I'm guessing Jack told you that," Barbara assumed, receiving a nod from Harmony. "It is hard to explain, but we're not truly immortal."

"What do you mean?" Shantae asked.

"We do not physically age, but eventually our bodily functions shut down over time," Barbara explained. "We can get sick and die. The longest a Genie has ever lived was a little over a hundred years."

"Around a human's lifespan," Zapple stated.

"How many Genies are there?" Harmony asked.

"A few hundred," Barbara stated. "Over time, the magic pyramid produced less and less Genies, with us only getting a new one once a decade." She looked Harmony directly in the eyes. "The other Genies saw the love your parents shared, and that inspired them to explore the stars to ensure their legacy after Jack destroyed the magic pyramid."

"So there are more half-Genies?" Shantae questioned, her eyes brimming with hope.

"Certainly, but not on Earth. The other worlds can only be accessed through the rifts in the Genie Realm," Barbara said somberly, watching Shantae's expression become filled with disappointment. "The Pirate Master stole my magic, so I cannot open a portal home."

"Wait, if half-Genies inherit their mother's powers, why can't Zapple do it?" Shantae asked.

"Because... my powers don't work as well as they used to," Zapple groaned. "I haven't practiced with them enough. And even if I could, I don't know how to direct the portal to take us to the Genie Realm."

"Are Genie powers tied to health?" Bolo asked.

"What?" Zapple asked, her face turning red.

"You know, because you're kinda on the really big side?" Bolo said innocently. "Maybe it slows down your magic?"

"Bolo..." Sky sighed, facepalming herself.

"You may want to quit while you're ahead," Emma said to Bolo.

"Uh, sorry," Bolo murmured, rubbing his head nervously. *Wait, what did I say wrong?*

"Look, I know I'm fat. You can just say it," Zapple grumbled, her expression still bitter. "It's just something I gotta work on." Staring down at her gut, the mermaid grit her teeth. The massive lump that obscured her view of the ground irritated her to no end. Even her biggest shirt left her stomach exposed somewhat. *So when are you gonna do something about it?* she asked herself.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Bolo insisted.

"Just forget it!" Zapple barked, setting off a tense air in the room.

"Zap, please don't snap at our guests," Barbara said, her tone sounding disappointed.

"Sorry, Mom..." Zapple looked over to their guests, albeit unable to look them directly in the eyes. "Sorry... just another thing I gotta work on..."

"Okay... what about Vera's mom, Aja?" Shantae asked hesitantly, wanting to ignore the boiling pot that was Zapple. "Aja left her behind in the care of her father."

"I don't know," Barbara murmured. "I was never close with Aja. Nobody was; she was very closed off, even by our standards."

"So how did the Genies find out there were other realms?" Sky asked.

"Well, we had no idea that there was anything beyond our world initially," Barbara began. "Until one Genie, Astra, was experimenting with her magic, and accidentally created several rifts throughout the universe. They pop in and out of existence at random, with some unable to be closed."

"Just like the ones my mom and Ana were looking over," Harmony replied.

"You know more than I would have thought," Barbara stated. "How much do you know?"

"Not much," Harmony admitted sheepishly. "Just what Jack told me. Ana left behind a crystal that corrupted him, and he was left to rot in a dungeon with others like him."

Barbara looked away, hesitant to continue. "Well, that is the truth," she said weakly. "Serena warned me of the prisons, but I didn't believe her. I genuinely thought she had gotten things wrong and was fretting over nothing."

"How many other Genies were like you?" Shantae interjected. "Who genuinely didn't know?"

"I'm not certain," Barbara admitted. "We didn't exactly do polls on this sorta thing."

"Then how did Techno Baron bar communication with the prisoners and their families?" Harmony questioned. "And where is he now?"

"Most likely apathy and we don't know where he is," Barbara sighed. "He deleted all the records, keeping us from tracking him, and we had other things to worry about besides the Earth. We weren't always protectors. The first generation only helped other worlds out of boredom, only instilling a sense of morality behind it later."

"Was my mother one of the first generation?" Shantae asked.

"No," Barbara stated. "She was the most recent generation. Her skills were unrivaled, which was rather surprising given her lackadaisical personality."

"So are the Genies good guys or not?" Bolo questioned.

"It's not so black and white," Barbara stated. "They've always been a bigger picture type of people. Anything that's not universe-threatening they tend to just ignore."

"Then why are you on Earth instead of back home?" Rotty asked, looking at Barbara.

"This is my home," Barbara stated, gesturing towards her daughter with a smile. "And even if I wanted to, I can't. Like I said, my powers were stolen."

"Why didn't the Pirate Master just kill you?" Shantae questioned.

"My mom convinced him to spare most of the Genies he met," Harmony answered. "He showed me that in his vision."

"I didn't see Serena with him when he took my powers," Barbara stated. "He must have gone off on his own briefly."

Maybe he had a bit more self-control than I realized, Harmony thought. *Doesn't change what he did though.*

"So you can't give anyone in the Genie Realm a call?" Emma asked Barbara.

"Sadly no," Barbara sighed. "I have not heard from them in over a decade."

Harmony let out a sigh. *It feels like I'm going to end up with more questions than answers,* she thought miserably. "What... do you know about my parents?" she asked hesitantly. "Serena and Aaron."

"And mine," Shantae added. "Ana, and Karnov."

"Very little," Barbara stated, watching uncomfortably as a look of disappointment took hold of Shantae and Harmony. "Like I told Zap, most Genies kept to themselves. For a comparison, it was like an office job. You go to work, then you go home. The few friends I did have weren't either of your parents."

"Then what did you guys do for fun in the Genie Realm?" Shantae questioned.

"Usually we practiced our magic, or observed the other realms from afar," Barbara explained. "Fun, by your definition, was not a luxury most of us could afford."

No wonder my mom kept visiting Earth, Shantae thought to herself.

"So how did you two get caught up with Bolo?" Rotty asked, looking over to Zapple and Barbara.

"I can answer that," Bolo said eagerly, making Zapple silently groan. "See, a while ago some guy thought my fighting skills were awesome. And they got a town that wants a teacher, like those movies I watched as a kid, which is how I learned self-defense. So I'm gonna teach them while Zap's teacher, that same guy, makes them armor to protect themselves. And I'm gonna get paid for it!"

"Don't call me Zap," the mermaid said irritably. Hearing the nickname out of somebody's mouth other than her mother's made her realize how coddling the label sounded.

"Sorry," Bolo said awkwardly. While he wondered what he had said wrong, he did not feel like walking onto a land mine to find out.

"It's fine..." Zapple murmured, although her bitter tone implied otherwise.

"Hey Zapple," Shantae began.

"Yeah?" the mermaid asked.

"What are your powers exactly?" Shantae asked innocently. "I dance and then I can turn into four different animals, and Harmony... huh." The purple-haired girl gave an awkward shrug, smiling at the

redhead. "I guess I never learned your powers either."

"I think I make earthquakes?" Harmony assumed. "At least, I dance and then a hammer appears in my hands. And that hammer makes the ground shake a lot. It really drained me the one time I did it."

"My transformations don't drain me at all," Shantae said with a nervous chuckle. "So what about you, Zapple?"

"Well, when they still worked, electricity," Zapple answered. "I guess I could shoot it, give or take it from machines, anything really." She looked down at her fingertips, unable to generate even a spark like she could before. *One more thing I need to work on,* she thought angrily. "I can't dance to use my magic. I don't really know what triggers my magic. It does drain me if I use it too much."

"You're half-mermaid, right?" Shantae assumed.

"On my dad's side," Zapple said with a nod.

"That would explain the breathing tube," Shantae said with a smile. "I've met a few mermaids with those."

"I can't exactly stay on land without it," Zapple sighed, looking down at her humanoid legs. While she could appreciate being able to walk without prosthetics, the sight of her legs always felt inhuman and unnatural. A mermaid tail would have been far more convenient in her father's native world: the ocean. She closed her eyes for a moment, briefly reminiscing her times at the beach as a child. While she struggled to keep up with her father and aunt's swimming speed, the crashing waves were like a soft melody to her ears, something she had wanted to replicate with her singing as she got older.

"So where do we go from here?" Sky asked, snapping Zapple out of her trance.

"I would like to go home," Harmony sighed. "Grandma Cherami is gonna be worried sick if she wakes up from her nap and I'm not there."

"You want to come visit my island later?" Zapple asked, a tinge of

blind hope coating her voice.

"Maybe in the future," Harmony stated. "But right now, I need to figure out my own life before anything." A certain thought swirled in the back of Harmony's head of a certain someone. "I got a friend waiting back for me on Paradise Island."

"Vera?" Shantae questioned.

"No," Harmony said, shaking her head. "Wait, does Vera live there too?"

"Yeah, her whole family does," Rotty added.

Sasha was on Vera's island the whole time? Harmony questioned. *Did Vera hide her Genie side? Or does Sasha live far away from her?*

"No such thing as coincidence," Shantae observed with a smile.

"Two for one deal," Rotty joked. "Or six for one."

"Seems so," Harmony replied with a bright smile. "I should get going before my grandma wakes up."

"You're always welcome to visit us," Barbara stated. "One of Zapple's new friends can send over her contact info to you."

"I appreciate it," Harmony said before heading towards the door. "I'll be seeing you all."

As soon as the door closed behind the redhead, Barbara turned her head to a certain young man. "Now Bolo, there is something you should understand. The training could take a long time, we're not sure how long to be honest. Probably over a year."

"A year?" Bolo and Emma repeated in shock, while everyone else's jaws dropped.

"You're teaching a town self-defense," Zapple pointed out. "Not everyone can just learn by watching an old movie, you know."

"Wait, is *that* how you learned self-defense?" Rotty questioned, turning to Bolo.

"It just came very naturally to me," he said with an awkward smile.

"How far away is your home?" Shantae asked, looking at Zapple.

"About a day away by plane," Zapple stated. "My mom and I had to sort some stuff out at home first, so it took us a while to come out here."

"I bet Wrench could get us there even faster," Sky said with a competitive smile.

"What happened to wanting a break and being normal?" Zapple snarked.

"Somebody's got to keep an eye on Bolo," Sky replied. "And you're pretty normal, all things considered."

Zapple blushed briefly before letting out a chuckle. "Thanks... I appreciate that."

"So, are you willing to spend that much time away from home, Bolo?" Barbara asked.

"I think, but I gotta think about it," Bolo murmured. "I only thought it would be a week at most." Turning his head to Shantae, he asked, "Do you think I should? I mean, it would be hard to just pick everything up and leave. Like, who would be the Town Guardian? Who would take care of my granny?"

"I don't know," Shantae said with a worried shrug. "I'm not good at these kinds of decisions."

"We could give you and your granny temporary living arrangements," Zapple offered.

"What about me and my brothers?" Rotty asked. "We're looking for a house too."

"I'm not sure we could fit you," Zapple stated hesitantly. "I didn't

mean that the town has a spare house or anything, even for sale. You would all be living at my place, which is already crammed with my dad and aunt living there. We can only really house two more people, realistically one, and not forever."

"So anybody else would need to stay at an inn," Sky assumed. *I figured as much.*

"Zapple could try using her Town Guardian status to get discounts," Barbara offered. "But it still wouldn't be free."

"Hmm..." Rotty murmured, rubbing her chin. "Wait! I got it!" the zombie girl announced, snapping her fingers. "Bolo, could my brothers stay with your granny? I'm sure she would love the company, and Abner could protect the town while you're gone!"

"Hey, yeah! That could work!" Bolo cheered.

"See? Problem solved!" Rotty announced.

"But even still, a year is a long time," Bolo murmured, turning to Emma. "You think I should?"

"Well, do you want to?" Emma asked. "It's gotta be your choice, dude."

"Well, if it helps people, I should do it," Bolo murmured.

"I'll be there," Sky added. "At least for the beginning."

"I can come too," Shantae offered. "I'll probably only be able to stay for a few days, but I'll be there for you the whole time."

"Same here," Rotty offered. "Shantae thinks you're cool, and I want to get to know her friends better. So... win-win."

"And I can set up a temporary shop to give you more company," Emma offered. "The town sounds like it will have plenty of hungry customers!"

"Alright, then I'll do it," Bolo said eagerly, turning to Zapple. "I'll stay at an inn. Since your boss is paying me, that should help cover the

costs!"

"Are you sure?" Zapple offered.

"Yeah, it's no problem," Bolo insisted. "Hey, Sky. You should stay with Zapple and her family."

"Really?" Sky asked, noticing Zapple equally as surprised as her. "I mean... if your family is okay with it."

"I'm fine with it, as long Zap is too," Barbara stated with a smile. "One extra person can't hurt, especially if she's a friend."

Zapple let out a small chuckle. "I don't mind."

"Great, then everything is accounted for," Barbara spoke cheerfully.

"I did want to ask one thing," Sky stated. "What is the name of your island?"

I really wish they would have renamed it by now... Zapple thought to herself, reluctant to answer. "...Saliva... Island," she answered hesitantly, receiving several looks of shock and disgust from around her, except for Rotty, who was quietly chuckling. The blushing mermaid girl let out an embarrassed sigh. "It's more pleasant than it sounds..."

"So, are you gonna stay with your brothers at Bolo's?" Shantae asked Rotty as the two walked towards the former's home.

"Probably," Rotty answered. "If they have any jobs in Water Town, that will definitely help too. I know Bolo says he wouldn't charge us rent, but I don't wanna be a mooch, you know?"

"Doesn't being Town Guardian give you free rent?" Shantae asked.

"Turns out if you have more than three people living under your roof, they do charge," Rotty said with a shrug.

"Figures," Shantae sighed. "Nothing's ever easy."

"I know they pay Bolo well, so it should help, but having more than one income will too," Rotty added.

"A job in town will probably get people to stop being afraid of you too," Shantae suggested. "They would get to see the real you, like I do."

"Thanks," Rotty murmured, her cheeks turning a darker shade of green. "That would be good. I still owe you that dinner."

"Could you two speed it up?" Holly groaned, starting the two girls in front of her.

"Somebody should put a bell on you," Rotty commented.

"I feel like you would still ignore me even if I did," Holly snarked.

"I still don't get why we keep forgetting about you," Shantae wondered aloud. "Do you think it's part of your curse? Instead of taking our memories, we just forget you're there?"

"I suppose that's better than the alternative," Holly groaned. "Might have to do with that barrier you make."

"Hey, what's that?" Shantae questioned, walking up to her front door. A white paper was hanging lifelessly there, making Shantae pull it down to read the note. "EVICTION NOTICE?!" she shouted, startling both Rotty and Holly. "HOW?! WHYYYY?!"

"Wait, does that apply to me too?" Holly questioned.

"Didn't you just get your guardian job too?" Rotty asked.

Shantae dropped the paper and quickly grabbed the door knob to shake it, becoming frustrated when the door wouldn't open. "Oh, COME ON!"

Holly picked up the paper, reading it out loud. "Shantae, you, like many others, have failed to pay your rent this month. As such, are you being evicted. And... in accordance with the fears of our citizens, you have been banned from our town."

"WHAT?!" Shantae and Rotty shouted.

"There's more," Holly sighed. "We cannot afford a trouble magnet such as yourself. You have three hours to get your belongings. Any persons found living in your home after that point will be arrested and/or exiled. Have a good day."

"That tub of LARD!" Shantae snapped. "That home is ALL I've ever known!" The half-Genie fell down onto her knees, her eyes turning into rivers. "I can't pack everything up in a day... what about all of Mimic's stuff? I can't just leave that behind..."

"Shantae, it'll be okay," Rotty insisted, bending down to wrap her arms around her friend. "We'll figure it out, I promise." The zombie tightly gripped the half-Genie, refusing to let go until the latter's sobbing slowed down.

"T-thanks... Rotty," Shantae whimpered.

Heavy footsteps and deep breaths could be heard, making Shantae lift her head up. A fire in her eyes erupted as a certain gluttonous figure approached. "Are you still here?" the mayor groaned.

"Why...?" Shantae gasped, barely able to speak. "My uncle and I lived here our *entire* lives..."

"Yes, and it raises the question," the mayor began, taking a bite from his chocolate bar. "How our town managed to survive for so long with you around."

"...What?" Shantae questioned.

"She put her life on the line," Rotty snapped. "For ungrateful slobs like you."

"She brought a freakshow into our town, who killed somebody and unsettled the masses," the mayor judged, looking down upon the zombie girl. "And she seems to be doing it again with... whatever you are."

Rotty gritted her teeth, lunging at the mayor and wrapping her fingers around his neck. "Listen here, you walking donut! Shantae

didn't bring that monster here! It wasn't her fault!"

"Rotty, stop choking him!" Shantae snapped, forcing Rotty out of her rage.

"I'm sorry," Rotty sighed, ignoring the mayor gasping for air. "It's just... what he did..."

"How... dare you..." the mayor growled, barely managing to stand up. "If you two aren't out of here right NOW..."

"Yeah, we got the memo," Rotty groaned, helping Shantae up.

The mayor took notice of Holly in the corner of his eye. "When did you get here?" he asked. "In fact, who are you?"

"I-"

"I guess it doesn't really matter," the mayor interrupted. "If you're friends with Shantae, I want you out too."

"Just got one question," Holly demanded, trying to bury her anger. "Those people you evicted lately... did it include a mother and her child?"

"Probably," the mayor shrugged. "I normally don't send out personalized notes like I did with Shantae."

"Mia, and her mom Sabrina," Holly stated through gritted teeth. "Did you evict them too?"

"Sa...brina?" the mayor repeated. "I think so. She was one of the first on the list."

"That's all I needed to hear." Holly's knuckles rammed into the mayor's teeth, blistering his crowns as the mayor was sent off his feet. Falling onto his back, the mayor struggled to move until he fell into unconsciousness. Holly took a deep breath, feeling both relieved and disappointed that the man was still breathing.

Shantae let out a dejected sigh. "Poor Mia..." she whimpered. *I won't even get to say goodbye to her...*

"Given our luck, you may see her again," Rotty suggested, helping Shantae stand up.

"That should give us some time to get your stuff and get outta here," Holly stated.

"I hope Bolo doesn't mind a few more heads in his home," Shantae whimpered, wiping her moist eyes. She walked over to the front door and pulled her head back, letting her hair whip against the door repeatedly until it burst into splinters.

"Do you have a suitcase to pack your things?" Rotty asked.

"Yeah, it'll finally have a use," Shantae said through a sad chuckle, walking up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Don't forget the hammock," Holly suggested.

"Holly..." Shantae giggled somberly. "You just want it..."

"It is nice..." Holly conceded. "But it is yours, plus, I think you need it more than me."

"Bolo will probably have a spare bed or something you can use," Shantae offered. "Being Town Guardian gave him a nicer place to live than he had before."

"An actual bed would be good," Holly said with a nod.

"Now... I need to see how much I can cram into my suitcase," Shantae stated, walking over to her dresser.

"I'll go see what food we can take along," Holly said, walking downstairs.

Shantae looked over a framed photo on top of her dresser, making her become lost in memory. "What is it?" Rotty asked, walking up to Shantae's side.

"It's me and Uncle Mimic," Shantae whispered, taking the frame off the dresser to study it. "Back when I was a little kid."

"He had a pompadour?" Rotty asked, studying the image with Shantae. The older man was happily carrying an excited purple-haired child over his shoulders. The half-Genie's eyes dripped tears as she pressed her hand against her uncle's beard in the photo.

"For a long time he did," Shantae said. "Then I tried cooking as a kid, and caused a fire by accident. He was pretty stressed from that, but he wasn't mad. Ever since that day, I promised to be a better cook."

"Are you now?" Rotty asked.

"Well, the house is still standing," Shantae joked, making the zombie girl giggle with her. "I still burn the food, but it doesn't cause fires at least."

"I love to cook," Rotty said with a smile. "Poe taught me how. Ab loves my scrambled eggs."

"Sounds good," Shantae agreed.

"You got any more family photos?" Rotty asked.

"No. My folks were never big on family photos," Shantae explained. "That's what Mimic told me. And he was usually very camera shy too." Shantae went behind her dresser, pulling out her suitcase and placing the picture frame in there first. "I wanted to ask, do you remember your parents more now?"

"Slowly but surely, why?" Rotty asked.

"You think they would be proud of who you are now?" Shantae questioned, looking over the frame of Mimic one more time.

"I think so," Rotty said with a small nod, rubbing her elbows anxiously. "At least... I hope so. I still need to visit them back on Vera's island..."

"Rotty, of course they'd be proud of you," Shantae said with a smile. "I'm just wondering... if my family would be proud of me. I know that's a silly question but..."

"Shantae, are you kidding? There's not a doubt that anyone in your family would be proud of you!" Rotty said, grinning from ear to ear. "Even your screwup of a mom would be proud of you."

"Yeah, cleaning up her messes," Shantae chuckled quietly. "But it's less her. More... my dad and my uncle. I really wish my dad was still here, uncle Mimic too. I know so little about my family, and I don't think I will ever learn more about them now."

"Then focus on the future," Rotty suggested. "Take the good memories and let that be the brush that paints your path."

"Good advice," Shantae said, wrapping her arms against the zombie "Rotty, you're a really good friend."

"Thanks," Rotty whispered, embracing Shantae as her eyes slowly became moist from joy. "But I didn't come up with that advice. I read it off a fortune cookie."

"I appreciate the honesty," Shantae giggled, ending the hug while making the zombie giggle join her in chortles. Suddenly, a growling sound interrupted their laughter. Shantae looked down at her stomach, realizing the source of the rumbling. "I could really use that dinner right now."

"I'll pay for it," Rotty offered. "It could help take your mind off things."

"Sure," Shantae replied, her cheeks turning crimson. "It's... a date."

This one took a while to write thanks to some serious writer's block.

Fun Fact(s):

1. The scene of Rotty choking the mayor was inspired by the SpongeBob episode "Can You Spare a Dime?" where SpongeBob chokes Mr. Krabs after having had enough of his nonsense.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

"A date?" Rotty repeated in disbelief. "Are you... sure?"

"I thought you'd be happier about this," Shantae giggled.

"I mean, I am," Rotty chuckled back. "Just thought you wanted to take things slow."

"I am," Shantae replied. "Just one date and see where it goes."

"In that case, I need to go all out!" Rotty said eagerly. "A simple dinner doesn't fit you. I need to do something big!"

"I'm open to ideas," Shantae stated with a smile.

"Are you two almost done?" Holly asked, startling the two. "The mayor's not gonna be sleeping forever. And I don't want people asking questions."

"Right, almost!" Shantae shouted, rushing over to toss clothes in her suitcase.

"Sorry, got distracted," Rotty said with a nervous laugh.

"Flirt when we're not running from the law," Holly groaned, making the other two girls blush.

Shantae continued cramming clothes and other belongings into her suitcase until it could contain no more. "Okay, done!" she announced before she noticed Holly holding a garbage bag behind her. "What do you got there?"

"All the food I could realistically bring," Holly stated. "So stuff from the pantry. Can we get going now?"

"Ready, partner in crime?" Rotty joked, playfully elbowing Shantae.

"Partner, huh?" Shantae said with a laugh. "You're getting a kick out of this."

"Well, it's not the first time I've been banned from a town," Rotty snarked.

"Can we go already?" Holly snapped.

"I've never had so many guests before!" Vanessa chuckled, watching Shantae unpack her suitcase in the guest bedroom.

"Thanks for letting me stay over," Shantae murmured, shyly looking away from Vanessa.

"Don't worry about it, dear!" Vanessa insisted, beginning to walk towards the door. "You've always been there for Bolo. The least I can do is repay your kindness," she spoke, walking out of the room.

"Thanks..." Shantae whispered before she saw Rotty walk in.

"How's the unpacking going?" Rotty asked.

"Almost done," Shantae answered with a small smile, pulling out a certain device from the suitcase. "I made sure to pack my DVD player."

"Sweet," Rotty said eagerly. "I never really watched a lot of shows growing up. I mostly just played whatever games Poe was playing. He really likes platformers."

"So when are your brothers going to be here?" Shantae asked.

"In a couple hours," Rotty explained. "Ab said he had a job interview. Had to shave first. Poe was going with him for good luck."

"Abner did look a little rough around the edges," Shantae giggled before she noticed Holly in the corner of her eye. Or rather, Holly resting in a sleeping bag Shantae had lent her. *She falls asleep*

quickly.

"The mayor isn't going to come to track you down, right?" Bolo asked, walking into the room. "I don't mind letting you guys stay here, but I'd feel better knowing the cops aren't after you."

"We'll probably be fine," Shantae stated. "The mayor is really lazy. He'll just forget about us."

"Alright. So... do you guys want some dinner?" Bolo asked.

"Maybe later," Shantae replied. "I need a bit to figure some things out."

"Sure," Bolo said with a smile. "Whatever you guys want, it's on me."

"Thanks, Bolo," Rotty grinned.

"Glad you remembered my name isn't Hedgehog," Bolo chuckled, closing the door.

Rotty let out a relaxed sigh, plopping down onto the bed. "I wish more people liked my nicknames. I think I'm one for three."

Shantae sat down next to Rotty, happily looking down upon the zombie girl. "Maybe try giving me another one," the half-Genie offered.

"You sure?" Rotty asked, receiving a nod. "Well... I don't know. I really want to call you snack cakes, but I know you hate it."

"Why snack cakes?" Shantae asked.

"Well, I had eaten a pack of snack cakes earlier that day," Rotty chuckled. "And when I looked at you, you seemed sweet, just like them."

Shantae struggled not to giggle. "So if you ate a slice of pizza, would I be Pepperoni?"

"No, you're not greasy," Rotty laughed, sitting upward. "Snack cakes are my favorite food."

"Did you think I was gonna be special or something?" Shantae asked. "To name me after that?"

"Not exactly," Rotty replied. "I just name stuff that comes to mind. Bolo's got spiky hair, so he's Hedgehog. You're sweet, so... snack cakes."

"Fine, but what does that make you, Rottytops? Spoiled?" Shantae joked.

"My expiration date isn't for a while," Rotty snarked.

"Good to know," Shantae chuckled. "You think maybe we could do the dinner tonight?"

"But all my plans..." Rotty said melodramatically, holding her hand over her eyes.

"If things go well, we can use them in the future," Shantae chuckled, placing her hands over Rotty's.

The zombie girl blushed, her cheeks a darker shade of green. "I-I..." Rotty murmured, wanting to wrap her fingers around Shantae's hands. *This doesn't feel real. This... isn't right,* she thought, her breathing becoming faster while pulling herself away from Shantae. "Are you sure about this?" the zombie whispered.

"What do you mean?" Shantae asked.

"I mean... why now?" Rotty questioned. "After everything that's happened, don't you want to wait a bit? There's no hurry, you know."

Shantae's eyes became moist as she looked down. "I... I've been through a lot," she whispered. "So many nights... I have nightmares. About Risky... and Mimic. I failed them. There's so much in my life out of my control, I just... want to change that. Starting with my own happiness."

"I get that, but there's no guarantee I'm gonna make you happy," Rotty pointed out. "What if something happens? What if you end up hating me?"

"Rotty, I can't hate you," Shantae giggled. "Most you could do is annoy me."

"You sure?" Rotty asked. "You were pretty mad at me after Mimic..." The zombie girl cut herself off, hesitant to finish the sentence.

"Rotty, it's not your fault," Shantae insisted.

"I try to keep telling myself that," Rotty whispered, balling her fists. "But I could have done something more, maybe write down what Mimic had told me. I didn't take my memory issues seriously until I met you..."

"Even if you wrote it down, there's no guarantee you'd remember the context," Shantae pointed out. "You said it yourself that you needed other people to help you remember."

"I guess..." Rotty murmured, hanging her head. "But... wouldn't you rather a different girl? One who doesn't remind you of everything bad that's happened?"

"Rotty, you're probably the best thing that's ever happened to me," Shantae said with a bright smile. "You're my only friend who shares my interests, and the only one who makes me happy just by thinking of them."

"Really?" Rotty asked, lifting her head up.

"I mean it," Shantae promised. "Anybody would be lucky to have a girl like you."

The zombie girl's tears moistened as her lips curved upward. Wrapping her arms tightly around Shantae, Rotty sniffled while serene tears dripped down her cheeks. "Thanks, snack cakes."

"Anytime, Rotty," Shantae whispered with a smile. The hug continued for longer than Shantae had expected, but she did not mind. Rotty eventually pulled away, blushing at the realization she had been embracing the half-Genie for so long.

"So... you ever been to those magic carpet races?"

"Oh, yeah!" Shantae said excitedly. "Mimic took me every year for my birthday!"

"Lucky you," Rotty giggled. "I know they're in Sequin Land this time of year, and I've always wanted to go."

"Sure, let's do it!" Shantae replied eagerly. "You can buy the tickets at the entrance. We could go tonight!" Rotty began chuckling to herself, something Shantae took notice of. "What's so funny?"

"It's not really funny," Rotty admitted. "It's just nice... seeing you happy."

"It's nice *being* happy," Shantae replied. "But wait, aren't you worried about people freaking out about you in a public place?"

"I didn't really think about that," Rotty admitted, rubbing her chin. "Well... if they have a problem with me, that's on them. I ain't doing anything wrong."

"That's the spirit," Shantae smiled. "Let me get changed, then we can go."

"I should too," Rotty murmured. "Oh right... my suitcase is back in the carriage with Poe and Ab."

"I mean, what could you really change into?" Shantae joked. "I never see you wear anything else."

"I have other clothes," Rotty defended herself with a smile. "I just have a few pairs that match this one."

"Down to the rips and tears?" Shantae questioned.

"Yeah, wouldn't feel right without them," Rotty snorted. "I woke up in those clothes as Rotty. They're who I am. So I added the rips and tears to match my original set."

"Well, if you want to borrow some of my clothes, feel free," Shantae replied.

"Really?" Rotty asked.

"Yeah, I don't mind," Shantae stated. "You can wear one of my old pit crew outfits. I got it a few years ago at those races."

"Thanks," Rotty said eagerly, wrapping her arms around the half-Genie. Shantae did the same, enjoying the embrace. Once the hug had completed, Rotty went through the drawer to the right of the bed and picked out a certain outfit: black yoga pants and a t-shirt with a checker flag pattern. "Is this it?"

"That's the one," Shantae replied. "If you don't like it, you can borrow whatever you want."

"I LOVE IT!" Rotty announced, her eyes becoming starry. "Give me a minute to change."

"I need a minute too," Shantae agreed.

Rotty walked out of the bathroom connected to Shantae's bedroom. "How do I..." The zombie stopped herself when she saw a certain half-Genie wearing a light blue dress. "Wow..." the zombie girl murmured. "You look... good."

"Thanks. It's a dress I wore to prom," Shantae giggled. "Well, it wasn't real prom. Just Uncle Mimic didn't want me to feel lonely, so he made a prom for me, Bolo, and Sky." The half-Genie stared the zombie girl up and down, smiling brightly. "You look great, too."

"I mean, they're *your* clothes," Rotty snarked. "Patting yourself on the back there."

"They look better on you," Shantae replied. "Honest."

"Thanks," Rotty beamed. "I rarely get compliments like this."

"Maybe we can change that," Shantae replied, her cheeks turning crimson.

"It does feel like it's missing something though," Rotty murmured before she noticed something peeking out of the dresser. "There!" The zombie girl yoinked a red hoodie out of the clothes pile and

wrapped it around her waist. "You like?"

"I love," Shantae giggled.

"Thanks," Rotty said, her face turning a darker shade of green. "So... ready to go?" she asked, holding out her arm.

The half-Genie smiled, accepting Rotty's offer. "Whenever you are." The two walked out, where they saw Bolo and his grandmother playing a game of cards at the dinner table. *Bolo knows how to play poker?* Shantae questioned, watching the blue-haired young man have a face of complete concentration.

Vanessa looked up and smiled. "Don't you two look stylish?" she said happily, making Bolo look over his shoulder to see as well.

"Is that your old prom dress?" Bolo asked, looking over to Shantae.

"Yep," Shantae nodded as Rotty giggled. "We're going out."

"Where to?" Bolo questioned.

"Someplace special for dinner," Rotty replied.

"You guys can eat without us," Shantae added. "We'll be back late."

"Fashionably late!" Rotty announced, pointing her left index finger up to the ceiling.

"Do you two have your key to get back in?" Vanessa asked, receiving a nod from the couple.

"Don't worry, we got it," Rotty assured, heading for the front door.

"My phone's charged, so text me if you need to," Shantae stated, shutting the door behind her.

Vanessa beamed, clasping her hands together. "Those two... such good friends!"

"Really?" Bolo asked, eying his grandmother with a perplexed look. "I thought they were going on a date."

"So this is Cape Crustacean, huh?" Rotty observed, looking at the rocky exterior of a stadium standing before herself and Shantae. "Shorter walk than I expected."

"They do a race every hour, so we should be able to watch a few before we have to go back," Shantae said eagerly.

"So how does this stuff work again?" Rotty asked. "I know they go around an oval a lot of times, but is there anything else to it?"

"Well, anybody knocked off their flying carpet is disqualified," Shantae explained. "Whoever finishes the race first, or is the last person standing, wins. There's also a safety net to make sure nobody gets hurt."

"Right," Rotty said with a nod. Walking up to the employee at the gates, Rotty pulled out her wallet. "How much is it?"

"Uh, forty gems per person," the young woman said with a yawn. "Uh... am I seeing things... or is your skin green?"

"I heard it's in style this time of year," Rotty snarked. "And you're one to judge, with a vase on your head."

"I like what I like," the woman said, putting her hands against the vase to keep it balanced. "Well... as long as your money's good, I don't really care what color you are."

"Thanks... I think," Rotty snickered, pulling out the necessary amount of gems. "Here you are!"

"Alright, have a nice time," the vase woman spoke, counting the gems.

"Sorry you had to deal with that," Shantae murmured.

"Nah, it's fine," Rotty assured her. "Could have been worse. Now... let's get some food."

"I think there's a vending machine nearby," Shantae suggested. "It's a lot cheaper than the food they sell here."

"Sounds like a plan," Rotty replied before she noticed the vending machine. "Ooh, snack cakes!" she shouted, racing to insert some gems into the machine.

"Wait, did you mean me or...?" Shantae questioned until she noticed Rotty returning with literal snack cakes.

"The food," Rotty giggled. Pulling out a small package from her pocket, she proudly held up a separate item to Shantae. "I thought you'd like this."

"A cinnamon bun?!" Shantae yelled eagerly, swiping the package and scarfing it down instantly. Once the food had been consumed, the half-Genie let out a satisfied sigh. "Thanks, Rotty."

"No problem," Rotty replied, having just finished eating her own snack. "Not exactly dinner, but we can get something more filling later."

"Honestly, the vending machine will be fine," Shantae insisted. "I don't want you to go broke for me."

"Good point," Rotty said with a chuckle. "Let's find our seats." As the couple walked up the stairs of the stands, they sat down upon one of the top rows. The arena was crowded with people eagerly awaiting for the race to begin. Looking over her shoulder, Rotty took notice of a metal fence keeping people from falling into the ocean behind the seats. "So how many laps are there again?"

"I think thirty," Shantae stated, resting her head against Rotty's shoulders. "You're nice and warm," the half-Genie murmured pleasantly.

"Well... I guess Vera fixing me has that effect," Rotty stammered, trying not to giggle from embarrassment. "I can actually feel the difference when it's hot or cold now."

"Wait, so you've never burned your mouth as a zombie?" Shantae asked, looking up to lock eyes with the zombie girl.

"Guess not," Rotty shrugged. "I mean, I could always tell if something's spicy, but I could never really tell if it was hot or cold. It

was just food to me."

"T-shirts! Get yer t-shirts here!" an older voice several rows down shouted.

"Ooh!" Rotty said eagerly, bouncing onto her feet. Looking down below, she saw an older man in a white tank top and tan pants holding up a canon in her arms. "Give me one!"

"You got it, missy!" the man shouted, aiming towards Rotty.

"Rotty, are you sure that's a good idea?" Shantae asked worriedly. "Those things pack a bunch."

"I'll be fine," Rotty insisted before she pointed her index finger at her face. "Hit me right here, man!"

"Ready... aim... fire!" the man announced, pulling the trigger. Out blasted a blue t-shirt that smacked Rotty's head off her neck. Shantae immediately lunged to catch Rotty's head, while the t-shirt and decapitated body fell over onto another person's lap. The entire crowd around Shantae and Rotty began shrieking, running down the stairs and nearly trampling the man with the cannon.

"I guess you had a point," Rotty giggled.

"We should probably go check on that guy," Shantae murmured, helping to reconnect Rotty's head back to her neck. "I think he'll be okay, but it can't hurt to check."

"Good idea," Rotty admitted, cracking her neck. "I think that fixed a knot I had. I should lose my head more often."

"Let's not make it a habit," Shantae chuckled, walking down the stairs with Rotty. "Hey mister, you doing okay?"

"Apart from my blood pressure, I think I'll be fine," the man stated, rubbing his bushy brown mustache. "Name's Joe."

"I'm Shantae," the half-Genie stated. "Guess we scared the crowd away."

"Sorry about that," Rotty murmured shyly, unable to look the older man in the eye.

"It's quite alright, not the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me," Joe sighed. "Are you a zombie or something?"

"I guess so," Rotty said with a shrug. "Does that bother you?"

"Not particularly," Joe shrugged. "I've met a few in my time."

"Really?" Rotty asked in shock.

"Although, you look more human than the other zombies I've met," Joe stated. "You use some kind of special moisturizer or something?"

"Something like that," Rotty spoke with a smile. "Thanks... for being cool with me. A lot of people... freak out when they realize what I am."

"It's not a problem," Joe replied. "Now if you'll excuse me, I should get going before people try to get me arrested."

"What do you mean?" Shantae asked.

"I knocked somebody's head off of her body," Joe stated nonchalantly. "There will undoubtedly be *somebody* trying to call the cops."

"I didn't think about that," Shantae murmured.

"Think maybe we should get going?" Rotty suggested. "In case one of them is after us?"

"Yeah, let's go," Shantae agreed.

"What did you two do?" Joe questioned.

"Long story," Rotty said with a shrug, walking past Joe. "One we don't have the time to tell. See ya later!"

"Sorry Joe!" Shantae apologized passionately as she walked away

with Rotty.

"What a strange pair," Joe murmured, rubbing his mustache inquisitively.

"Let's get out of here," Rotty suggested to Shantae. "I don't want our night ruined because we get arrested."

"I think you're being a bit paranoid," Shantae murmured, walking out of the stadium with the zombie girl.

"Maybe but I don't want to see you wearing orange," Rotty snarked. "Even if you could pull it off."

"So what are we supposed to do for the rest of the night?" Shantae asked.

"I don't know," Rotty said, scratching her chin while trying to form a plan. "I'll just wing it."

"Want some cheap food?" a voice suddenly called out. Before Shantae and Rotty stood a man wearing a blue long coat, although his face was obscured by thick, foggy goggles covering his eyes. The young man was standing behind a food cart, holding up a greasy hot dog in his left hand. "Name's Chuck."

Shantae placed her hand over her mouth, nearly gagging. "That doesn't look good," she murmured, plugging her nose due to the rancid odor.

"Really?" Chuck asked. "These have been selling like buns. It's the last one I have."

Rotty took a whiff, then mimicked the gaging motion Shantae had been doing. "I'll normally eat anything... but that..."

"Look, you don't have to be rude," Chuck groaned, putting the hot dog back and starting to move his cart. "I've sold more of these than you can imagine. Boss is gonna be proud of me!"

I can't imagine how, Shantae thought to herself, letting out a breath of relief once the man was out of sight. A growling sound came out

of the half-Genie's stomach, making her laugh nervously. "I guess I am still kinda hungry."

"Then let's go to a restaurant!" Rotty said eagerly. "How about Emma's shop? I think she gave you directions for it, right?"

After the stuff with Mimic, Shantae had remembered. *Emma gave me her number and directions so we could talk. Just... never got around to it.* Out loud, Shantae then asked, "You think she'd be open this late?"

"Only one way to find out!"

"I think it's closed, Rotty."

"Aw man." Rotty let out an annoyed groan, observing how Emma's home had all its lights shut off. Rubbing her grumbling stomach, she began to turn around. "Let's just go..."

The lights inside the home immediately sprang to life, startling the couple. The front door opened just as suddenly as a pink blur escaped from the light. "Hey, you guys!" Emma said excitedly.

"Weren't you just sleeping?" Shantae questioned.

"I was," Emma said with a nod. "But when people are hungry, it's time to work!"

"That works for me," Rotty said with a chuckle.

"How did you even know we were here?" Shantae asked.

"Chef's intuition," Emma giggled. "I just know. So would you like to come in?"

"Yeah, that's why we're here," Rotty snorted.

"Then come right this way," Emma said, blitzing back into the home.

"I wonder if she even needs to sleep," Shantae murmured.

"I'd say I envy her, but I don't wanna lie," Rotty laughed, making Shantae chuckle as the two began walking in. From there, they found a kitchen table in the middle of the main room, with wooden chairs decorating its perimeter. "Nice table."

"I know right?" Emma agreed. "I've been able to afford so much better now thanks to having customers! So what would the lovely couple like?"

Shantae froze up, her cheeks turning crimson. "Uh... what?"

"Well, aren't you two on a date?" Emma asked, scratching her head in confusion.

"Yeah, we are," Rotty stated nonchalantly, making Shantae's entire face boil up. "How'd you guess?"

"Chef's intuition," Emma joked once again. "I can just tell sometimes. Is... something wrong, Shantae?"

"Just feels weird to be called... a couple," Shantae murmured. "This is still our first date..."

"Well... I hope my food can make it a good one!" Emma announced. "How about I surprise you two?"

"That's fine with me," Rotty replied, walking over to the kitchen table.

"Great!" Emma announced, racing into the kitchen area. "Give me a bit!"

Rotty pulled out a chair from the table, presenting it to Shantae. "Might I offer you a chair in this trying time?" she said melodramatically.

"You're too kind," Shantae snickered, sitting down in the chair presented to her. Rotty then pulled out the chair to the left side of Shantae, sitting down so that the two faced each other from a ninety degree angle.

"So..." Rotty began. "You come here often?"

"Not really," Shantae chuckled. "Just when there's a pretty girl with me."

"Oh, you know any?" Rotty snarked.

"Only one," Shantae giggled.

"You've got to introduce us," Rotty joked. "I love pretty girls."

"Just try looking in a mirror," Shantae replied. "You'll recognize her."

Rotty giggled quietly, rubbing her eyes which had just become moist. "You really mean that?"

"Of course," Shantae insisted. "Do I need to say it with a megaphone?"

"No," Rotty chuckled. "Just... not used to hearing that. It feels weird... but I kinda like it."

"Rotty, you've known for a while that I like you," Shantae said with a smile.

"Yeah, but I thought it might wear off," Rotty said with a shrug. "Then things would be back to normal."

"What is *normal* for you?" Shantae asked.

"I... don't know," Rotty murmured. "I guess... just finding a random person pretty, then moving on. The last time I *really* dated was before I became a zombie... but I wasn't really me yet, you know? And now that I am me, it's always felt like nobody really wanted to be around me. I tried, but some just weren't interested in the real me... and some were pretty mean about it."

"Rotty, that's not your fault," Shantae insisted. "If someone can't love you for who you are, it's best just to move on and find someone who will."

"I think I might have already," Rotty smiled, although the cheerful expression was faint. "It's just taken a long time to find that person, and that's why it hurts."

"Well, I'm here now," Shantae stated, reaching over to touch Rotty's hand.

"T-thank you," Rotty whispered as she took Shantae's hands in her own, happily letting the tears stream down her face.

"Food's ready!" Emma announced out of nowhere, startling the couple before her. "Was I... interrupting something?"

"No, you're fine," Rotty laughed.

"Are those burgers?" Shantae asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yep!" Emma confirmed.

"How did you make those so fast?" Shantae questioned. "It's only been a couple minutes."

"A magician never reveals her secrets," Emma said, placing the plates down in front of her customers. "It's on the house, so don't worry about the bill."

"Wow, thanks," Shantae said, eying her burger with a deep hunger.

"After all you've been through, I figured you could use a break," Emma stated. "You holding up okay?"

"Yeah," Shantae said with a small nod. "Not perfect, but I'm trying to keep my head up."

"I'm glad to hear it," Emma said, clasping her hands together. "If you guys need me, I'm gonna go take a nap. I'll take care of the dishes after you guys are gone."

"Thanks," Rotty smiled, letting Emma return to her bed at the edge of the room. Plopping down, she immediately began snoring alongside Wobble Bell. "Wow, wish I could fall asleep that quickly."

"I never realized how small this place was until now," Shantae murmured, noticing the lack of a proper bedroom in the home. *I hope she can get a proper home someday.*

"Let's dig in," Rotty said eagerly, picking up her burger. Chomping down, she savored the juicy flavor of the meat. "It's sooo good! Hey look, snack cakes. I'm eating brains!" she joked, pointing to the mushy patty.

"Maybe it'll make you smarter," Shantae snarked, munching on her own burger.

"I wouldn't mind that," Rotty giggled.

"This is the best burger I've ever tasted," Shantae murmured, grazing through her dinner.

"You want a napkin?" Rotty suggested, plucking one off a stack on the edge of the table. "Your face looks a bit... messy."

"Thanks," Shantae said, wiping her face with the napkin. "Did I get it all?"

Rotty nodded. "Actually... you did miss a spot," she said, standing up and walking over to Shantae. Bending down, she quickly pressed her lips against Shantae's cheek. The half-Genie's ears perked up as her cheeks became redder than rubies. The zombie girl's own cheeks were flushed, making her pull herself away in the heat of the moment. "Sorry... I... just thought I... don't know..."

"You stole that from Desert Blaze," Shantae giggled. "When Doreen kissed her boyfriend."

"Maybe..." Rotty murmured, trying to hide her smile. "So, you didn't mind it?"

"Well, I'd have to think about it," Shantae said, standing up. "By the way, you got something on your face too." Repeating the same motion as Rotty, Shantae gave the zombie a long peck on the cheek. Keeping her lips against Rotty's cheek for a bit longer than Rotty had, Shantae noticed Rotty becoming flustered with a nervous grin. When the kiss had finally finished, Rotty was giggling uncontrollably, being left in a blissful trance.

"Does this mean I get a second date?" the zombie asked between giggles.

Shantae grinned at Rotty. "I'd say at least a dozen more," she affirmed, going back to kiss the zombie's cheek once more.

Having finished their dinner, Shantae and Rotty were making their way back to Water Town. "You know, this place is called Spider Forest," Shantae said, observing the empty trees around herself and Rotty.

"It is?" Rotty asked with a small sense of eagerness in her voice.

"I remember seeing spiders here before, but not anymore," Shantae murmured, studying the lack of arachnids. "I wonder what happened to them." Shantae stopped in her tracks, putting a hand to her ear. "Did you hear that?"

"No, what is it?" Rotty asked before she heard the sound of sobbing. "Is that crying?"

"Let's go check it out," Shantae suggested, walking in the direction of the whimpers.

"Please... just snap out of it sweetie," an older woman's voice begged. "Tell me what's wrong..."

"Who is that?" Rotty questioned.

"That voice... I think I know it," Shantae murmured. While it was dark out, the moonlight shone just enough for Shantae to recognize the figure. An older woman with long, messy black hair and scraggly clothes was bent over with a smaller figure resting against a tree. "Sabrina?"

The older woman turned around, her eyes widening in shock. "Shantae?" she asked in disbelief, rising to her feet to face the half-Genie "Please, you have to help her!"

Shantae looked over Sabrina's shoulder, making her jaw drop. "Mia?!" she shouted, bending down to see the lifeless child. Mia had a frozen grin on her face, with soulless white eyes that lacked irises and pupils. The child was slumped over, feeling almost cold to the

touch. And yet somehow, her body moved ever so slightly, taking small breaths. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know!" Sabrina shouted. "We got evicted, and I didn't have time to pack! Then we came across some guy selling hot dogs a few hours ago! He gave Mia one for free, she ate it, and a few minutes ago this happened!"

"Hot dogs?" Shantae repeated. "Was he wearing a blue long coat?"

"Yes, and goggles too! Where is he?!" Sabrina shouted hysterically, shaking Shantae by the shoulders.

"I don't know!" Shantae said worriedly. "He didn't say where he was going."

Sabrina's moist eyes leaked rivers of sobs as she let go of Shantae. Falling onto her knees, she cried, "What am I supposed to do? Mia's all I got left..."

"What exactly is wrong with her?" Rotty questioned, bending over. "She seems... frozen, but alive."

"I wish I knew..." Sabrina whimpered. "She won't stop smiling... it must have been something in that food..."

Shantae placed a hand on Sabrina's shoulder, making the mother's sobs slow down. "Sabrina, I promise we'll fix this."

"Can you use some magic?" Sabrina pleaded. "You're a Genie, right? You've got to have *some* magic after all these years!"

"My magic on its own can't help her," Shantae began, making Sabrina's heart sink. "But I know somebody who can." Inside Shantae's mind, the half-Genie shuddered at the possibility of failure. *I don't know if Vera and I can fix this, but it's worth a shot. Maybe since it's just one person, it won't hurt her that much this time?*

"Did that guy say anything that might help us find him?" Rotty asked.

"Wait... are you a zombie?" Sabrina asked worriedly, pulling herself

back from the green girl.

Rotty let out a sigh, rubbing her temples in frustration. "Yes, but I'm Shantae's friend. You can trust me."

Sabrina turned her head to Shantae, who said, "Believe me, you can't judge a book by its cover."

"Okay..." Sabrina said hesitantly. "He said he was born and raised on Paradise Island, where he used to sell his food."

"That's Vera's Island," Shantae recognized. "Did he say anything else?"

"He mentioned his boss was gonna station him at Saliva Island next," Sabrina murmured.

"Zapple," Shantae realized. "We need to warn her, and Vera too. In case he pays a visit back home."

"Don't forget about Harmony," Rotty added. "She's going to visit Vera, remember?"

Shantae nodded as she took a deep breath. She had truly wanted Vera and Harmony to have normal lives once again, but this unpleasant news was sure to be a deterrent. *And just after everything with the Pirate Master too,* she thought to herself. "Here we go again..."

"You did what?"

"I p-put the chips in the food and s-sold it," Chuck stammered, falling onto his back and hitting the wooden floor. He had returned to his boss's headquarters with the hope of a promotion of his efforts. Now, he was worried about leaving the room in one piece. "You said you wanted a test run of that technology, right?"

"In a controlled environment, and only done by people with an actual brain!" a much older man spoke with restrained aggression, holding his hands over his head. This man only had one eye in the center of

his face, judging his subordinate with a glare. He wore a blue long coat like Chuck did, along with a cider-colored shirt, but the coat was decorated with several medals. On the bottom half of his body were tan pants and brown combat boots. On his head rested a blue cap that had a tail on the back that resembled a tanuki. "I'm still negotiating a deal with this island. Creating panic will ruin that!" the leader snapped.

"I know, Mr. Ammo Baron... sir..."

"And why are you in uniform?!" Ammo Baron roared. "Are you trying to give us away?!"

"No-no. Of course not..."

"Did anyone follow you?!"

"I-I don't think so..." Chuck murmured, struggling to stand up.

Ammo rubbed his temples profusely, letting out a groan. "Were you able to see the results of your tests?"

"Uh... not really..." Chuck whimpered. "But it's not like anybody got suspicious, so we should be fine!" Getting on his knees and clasping his hands, he began to beg. "Boss, it won't happen again, I promise!"

Ammo Baron took a deafening stomp forward, making Chuck hyperventilate. With each step, Chuck's heart beat faster and faster until the distance between them was almost nonexistent. The baron placed his arms on Chuck's shoulders and let out a hearty laugh. "*That* we agree on."

Vinegar's blood ran cold as a scream drilled its way into her ears until the shriek was immediately cut off. She understood this was part of the job, but it never got any easier. *Why does this keep happening?* she wondered, her body shuddering. *He really needs to hire better soldiers.*

The young woman of nineteen years let out a deep sigh. She wore a

similar tanuki hat to her leader, but she had short blonde hair underneath whereas Ammo Baron had none whatsoever. Orange-plated armor adorned her upper half while blue armor covered the rest, along with a pair of goggles resting just above her forehead. Just below her eyes were a pink stripe on each side that reached down to her chin.

The door opened as Ammo Baron made his way out, walking up to Vinegar. "Sorry about that," Ammo Baron spoke, rubbing a crimson liquid off his knuckles. "Just had to tie up some loose ends."

Vinegar nodded, slowly feeling more relaxed. "I understand, Dad."

"I trust *you* have good news," Ammo Baron spoke.

"We finished surveying the entire island, and the weapons they have are not nearly enough to stop us," Vinegar stated. "Oh, and the leaders of Mud Bog Island agreed to give us their land, without the need for a Trial of Champions."

"Good," Ammo stated with a mirthy grin. "Compliance is always preferable."

"I gotta ask," Vinegar began, taking a moment to crack her neck.

"Go on," Ammo spoke, shaking his hand in an approving motion.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to tinker with that stolen tech?" Vinegar asked. "We don't even know who made it, or why."

"Of course," Ammo Baron began, crossing his arms. "If we can figure it out, it can give us an advantage for our expansion."

"I know," Vinegar stated with a sigh. "Peace for everyone, like you said. But I'm still having trouble seeing what makes those chips tick."

"You'll figure it out," Ammo assured her. "If not, just let somebody else handle it. No pressure."

"No, I can do it," Vinegar stated. "So what's our next move?"

"I'm almost done negotiating a deal with Sequin Land's owner,"

Ammo Baron stated. "Did I ever tell you I grew up here? In that old fishing dump, Scuttle Town."

"No, Dad," Vinegar said with a small chuckle, crossing her arms. *I've always wanted to fish,* she thought to herself.

"I always wanted to help out my home," Ammo stated. "And now that I'm in charge of the Ammo Army, I can. Just picture it! It'll be beautiful!"

"So what's after this island?" Vinegar asked.

"We're going to visit your uncle," Ammo said with a smile. "Of course, it won't be a friendly visit, as you know. Saliva Island is next on my list."

Vinegar shuddered. "I hope it's more pleasant than it sounds."

"It will be," Ammo assured. "For us, anyway."

"You think Twitch is hiding there?" Vinegar asked.

"I could care less," Ammo said with a shrug. "We need to focus on the future."

"Understood," Vinegar stated. "Is there anything else you need, Dad?"

"I guess a hug couldn't hurt," Ammo said, letting out a mighty laugh. "Come on, for old time's sake!"

Vinegar let out a chuckle. "Alright, but only one. I gotta get back to my post and check on things."

Ammo walked over, wrapping his arms around his daughter. Vinegar smiled, doing the same. Her father towered over her like a giant, but it felt oddly comforting. "Just wanna let you know, I'm always proud of you, Vin. I love you."

Vinegar hugged her father even tighter. "I love you too, Dad."

Happy Pride Month, everyone! (Since this was posted on June 25, 2025)

Fan Cast:

Ammo Baron - Alastair Duncan (Senator Armstrong; Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance)

Vinegar - Ella Purnell (Jinx; Arcane)